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MADGE.

VOL. II.

MADGE.

BY

LADY DUFFUS-HARDY.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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MADGE

CHAPTER I.

IN THE MAGIC CIRCLE.

THE next evening was that on which Lady Erlescliffe held her first reception that season, and she expected a very large gathering. The entire suite of rooms were thrown open, and were elegantly decorated with flowers and evergreens; the air was laden with the sweet perfume of the double violets and other scented children of the Spring; lights gleamed on the walls and were reflected back, in tenfold, from the polished surface of the mirrors and

glasses which were ranged on all sides; everything looked *couleur de rose.* There was no sign anywhere of the aristocratic poverty of the hostess; on the contrary, everything appeared to be arranged on a scale of luxurious prosperity.

As the clock struck ten (for Lady Erlescliffe professed to give a "small and early"), she sailed into the room in all the glory of black velvet and old point lace which had been worn, in the stately dead days, perhaps by her great-grandmother, and now rarely saw the light except on Court occasions, or at such special times when she desired to appear at her best and grandest; for, after all, a great deal depends on "clothes." Carlyle has written a book, whereon hangs much keen and wise philosophy, to prove it. Strip the drawing-room belle of her tulle and tarleton, flowers and flounces, and dress her in the beggar's rags,

how swiftly would her attractions vanish! Rob the stately peacock of his gorgeous plumage, and what a poor miserable bird he is! We put on dignity with our lace and velvets, and lose it in the dressing-gown and slippers.

Lady Erlescliffe had a very stately and dignified appearance as she walked through her rooms, casting her eyes round on all sides to see that everything was in perfect order, and that all her instructions had been carried out.

Margaret had dressed early, making her toilette under Lady Erlescliffe's personal superintendence. She wore a dress of thin white gauzy material, which fell over her with airy, cloud-like grace; the countless, mysterious little pouffes and pleatings which formed the train, were fastened and decorated with tiny flossy feathering; and here and there, blossoming carelessly among the

soft white folds, were luxuriant trailing sprays of wild roses, and she wore wild roses in her hair, arranged with artistic grace by Lady Erlescliffe's own hands, who made her turn round about and walk up and down the dressing-room, that she might regard her from all points of view, and see that there was not a thing awry before she pronounced her ready for presentation to her friends below.

Lady Erlescliffe was proud of her young *protegée;* she thought her most lovely, and counted on her making quite a sensation and a brilliant conquest before the season was over; but she did not tell her *that*—she only smiled, nodding approvingly, saying,

"You will do very well, my dear," and they both descended and walked through the vacant rooms together. "You can sit down to the piano and amuse yourself for a time, I do not expect anyone will be here

just yet, but I am always down early. I would rather wait for my friends than allow my friends to wait for me. Punctuality is the soul of good breeding."

Presently the visitors began to arrive, and gathered thick and fast. Even to one casting a casual glance round, it was easy to discover who were and who were not *habitués* of the society there assembled. The well-bred hostess had a pleasant smile and kindly greeting for all as they shook hands and passed on into the reception-room, where those who knew each other, who lived the same life, and moved in the same circle, gathered in groups, or sauntered about, exchanging recognising nods or smiles with their friends and acquaintances. The straggling strangers—and in all large gatherings there are many—who were not in "the set," looked like wandering ghosts from another sphere—they knew nobody, nobody knew

them, and as there were no general introductions, they were never likely to be better acquainted. Some of the men leaned grimly against the wall, looking solemnly bored; the feminine portion, with eager eyes, appraised and criticised the dresses of their own sex, whispering their comments in each other's ears, praisingly or disparagingly as the case might be, and, while admiring the dress, often depreciating the beauty of the wearer.

How often in those fashionable gatherings do we look round and wonder why certain people are invited, why they are there? except as moveable furniture to fill the room. Everywhere there is a certain class of people to be found who cling like a ragged fringe to the skirts of society, and would rather be draggled through the social mire than not be seen there at all.

The carriages rolled to the door and set

down their occupants in such quick succession that the empty rooms were soon alive with the hum of voices, and filled with a moving mass of gaily-dressed women, looking doubly gay in contrast with the sombre, funereal-like habiliments which gentlemen are compelled to wear in the world of gaslight. What a pity it is that some patriotic "Worth" will not come forward to the aid of masculine humanity and set them free from the trammels of swallow-tails and chimney-pots! Surely fashion would soon muster an army of recruits, who would gladly hoist the standard of the ruffled and velvet age, and speedily beat the superfine broadcloth out of the field.

Miss Siward, the latest addition to London society, was liberally introduced to its several members. She was quite bewildered by the number of names which were crammed into her ears, and the strange

faces that, like a living wave, surged before her eyes; everyone had something pleasant to say to her; and her eager ears drank in the sparkling chit-chat or gossiping small-talk that circulated near her. Mrs. Granville Burke was among the early arrivals, and seemed at once to endow herself with a vested interest in Margaret, adopting a tone of special intimacy towards her, which both flattered and pleased the young girl, and made her feel less a stranger in the crowd. In spite of Lady Erlescliffe's warning, Margaret had taken a fancy to Mrs. Granville Burke, and when once she placed her liking she was not easily induced to take it away. It is impossible to like or dislike according to order.

Whilst they were mingling with an admiring and curious circle at one end of the room, Lady Erlescliffe of course remained at the other, receiving her guests.

She had a rather anxious and expectant look upon her face, till a gentleman with a *nonchalant* lounging gait came slowly up the stairs, fashionably late; then her eyes brightened, and her whole face beamed with something more than mere pleasurable excitement.

"My dear boy, my dear Cecil!" she said, as their hands and eyes met—the constant flow of society passing to and fro prevented a more tender or loving greeting; but from the look on her face, the tone of the few brief words she uttered, a stranger would have seen how dearly the mother loved her son. He stood beside her for a few minutes, now and then at convenient intervals whispering a word in her ear. Presently she said,

"My dear Cecil, you must not waste your time with me. Come, I want to introduce you to the belle of the evening."

"Please don't," he answered languidly; "I've seen so many belles already that I've lost my taste for the species."

"You've seen none like this," said the lady, in a low, eager voice; "she differs from the rest as much as an antique gem differs from the imitation trumpery of to-day. Come."

She left her receiving post, and, followed by her son, went in search of Margaret, who was still under the sheltering wing of Mrs. Burke. That lady had just whispered in her ear,

"I want to introduce you to a special friend of mine—he's been staring at you this last ten minutes—a very clever, celebrated man, very scientific, intellectual, and all that sort of thing."

The poor man had, no doubt, done something to deserve the character, but he looked the very picture of intellectual heaviness,

and hurled his ponderous phrases at your senses as though he were hurling a brick-bat at your head, and meant to demolish you body and soul by the weight of his arguments, which, however, very few were bold enough to answer; they generally went down under them, as a good swimmer dives under a great wave without attempting to confront it with any opposing force; but Mr. Throgmorton was a man to be known, and everybody liked to know him—at least, to have his name on their visiting list. Luckily that species of individual, the "bore," does not greatly flourish in the general gatherings of society, or Mr. Throgmorton would have been avoided like a plague. One man cannot button-hole another for many minutes together. A constant flow of interruptions circulates through the room, diverting the conversation into a hundred different channels; no matter

whether you are having your ears pierced with platitudes, or tickled with flattery, you are sure to be interrupted by a tap on the shoulder, and receive the introduction of a new friend, or the recognition of an old one.

Margaret was delighted to be introduced to a lion, no matter if it roared softly or roared not at all. They had just smiled and bowed to each other; he had made one of the ordinary remarks common to those occasions; she was regarding him with speculative eyes, wondering what pearls of price would next fall from his lips. Lady Erlescliffe touched her with the feather end of her fan, she turned round quickly.

"My dear, let me present to you my son, Cecil Slade. Miss Siward." She smiled, and left them.

The girl's soul flashed up into her face, the sudden leap of her heart sent the blood careering through her veins, eyes, lips,

dimples, and all broke into a smile of irrepressible delight—the ground seemed to heave beneath her feet, the lights danced, the hum of voices lost all distinctness, and became like the sound of wheels whirring in her ears—she saw nothing plainly but the one face that had looked down and smiled upon her beneath the orchard trees at home in Clinton. She was half ashamed of herself for showing such unmistakable signs of gladness; but she was taken unawares, and could have no more stilled the pulse of joy that thrilled through her than she could have turned the light of day into sudden darkness. His face paled, rather than glowed, with pleasure at the sight of her; a cloud fell over his eyes, but he never lost consciousness that the eyes of the world were upon them; the cloud cleared in a moment, and Margaret became conscious that they had exchanged friendly greetings,

had expressed mutual surprise and pleasure at meeting; then she found her hand was placed within his arm, and they were parading the room together, watching for the first opportunity of settling in some quiet nook, that they might enjoy a chat away from society's searching eyes. She was conscious, too, of one fact, that his face had not radiated with gladness as her own had done; and the great joy which had bubbled over was quietly simmering down to a more composed state of bliss—for it was bliss even to hear the sound of his voice again.

Mrs. Granville Burke had watched the meeting, and made a private note of it, for no one who had eyes could have failed to translate aright the expression of Margaret's face. Mr. Slade was whispering to her as they passed along,

"I knew we should meet somewhere in

this small world of London, but I never thought it would be here."

"Nor I," she answered, "and I must say you did not seem half so glad as—as I thought you would be."

"Didn't I?" he answered, more gratified than he chose to admit by her concluding words. "Ah!" he added, "you don't know how to measure gladness when it is deep down. I am glad to see you," his voice assumed that deep, earnest tone that had such a charm for her; "but I would rather it had been anywhere—than here."

"Why?" she asked, with innocent, wide-open eyes.

"Because—— Oh! do you forget our talk at Clinton? Ah! what a day that was! Of course I am a little hurt, grieved, indeed, to find that my mother was the lady we talked so lightly of; I never thought she could be reduced to this," and an ex-

pression, as of a spasm of actual pain, crossed his face.

"Please don't speak or look so!" whispered Margaret hurriedly, ready to burst into tears, "or I shall think you grudge me Lady Erlescliffe's kindness. I am most grateful to her, for I know it is a great condescension on her part to receive me here. It is not every lady of her rank who would chaperon a girl of mine."

"Hush! don't speak of it—my poor mother!"

Margaret felt the awkwardness of her position. She saw that the man's pride writhed beneath the mother's necessities, for *he* comprehended at a glance how matters stood; she hardly knew what to say or how to look, she was so afraid of wounding him; she saw how sensitive he was, and seized the opportunity of shifting the conversation.

"But how is it that Lady Erlescliffe is your mother?—your name is Slade."

"Slade is our family name, my father was a peer, and——"

"I see I am very ignorant; I must study the Royal Red or Blue Book?—which is it?—that tells all about such things; I had no idea when you came down with George that you were such a grand gentleman—next door to a peer, you know; I had never spoken to one before."

"Don't talk such nonsense; grand gentleman, indeed!—I'm a poor beggar, with a pocket full of unpaid tailors' bills, and nothing else."

"It is you who are talking nonsense now," she rejoined, with an incredulous smile.

"It is a fact," he answered. "I don't deny we come of a good old stock: if we could live on our own blue blood we should

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be well fed and nourished—as it is, we are like a pack of hungry hounds, ready to run down any mortal thing that promises a meal for to-morrow. You don't know how many people make a grand show before the outer world, and feel the screw of poverty at home."

She regarded him with a perplexed look. She could comprehend and perfectly understand the poverty that went to bed hungry and had no clothes to wear on Sunday; but the poverty that seemed to enjoy all the luxury that wealth had power to bestow was beyond her comprehension. Seated there in those elegant, stately rooms, amid the glitter of lights and perfume of flowers, with the sound of music in her ears and a throng of gaily-dressed women flashing their diamonds before her eyes, and, above all, as she glanced at her companion with his refined

face and perfectly appointed dress, she thought, "If all this betokens poverty, what is the use of riches?" He read her thought as it was passing through her mind.

"I know what you are thinking of," he said, "but you mustn't judge from appearances; when you smell the royal rose you don't see the canker at the root."

"I don't look for it, though I daresay if we grubbed after disagreeable things we could always find them; for instance, how could we enjoy our youth, and—and—"

"Beauty," he added, seeing she paused for a word.

"Well, yes, beauty, if we thought we should ever grow old and ugly like that—" and as she spoke she indicated a lady who had travelled far down in the vale of years, gaunt and bony, like a living

skeleton, tricked out in all the bravery of youth and beauty, wearing upon her withered throat and skinny arms the diamonds that had adorned her long, long ago, when she was young, and perhaps charming; with curling plumes and some dead woman's frizzled hair upon her head, and a stereotyped smile upon her thin lips, she looked like a galvanized corpse. Such ancient wrecks of humanity are constantly seen floating up to the surface of society; it seems as if they could not rest, they must come, like haunting ghosts, to revisit the scenes where their youth died long ago. Venerable and respectable age is always pleasant to look on, but when it decorates itself with foolish fineries, it sinks into a pitiable object. An old woman can no more be painted and patched to look like a young one, than the dead can be galvanized into life.

"That is a great-aunt of mine, and the most venerable scion of our house," said Mr. Slade gravely, in answer to her remark.

"Ah, Mr. Slade, I am so sorry I said that—it was silly and rude of me to make the remark," she said repentantly.

"Not at all," he answered, "you were quite right. She is old; she is ugly; but she enjoys life, and while she has a tooth in her head, or a leg to stand on, you'll find her in such scenes as this."

"Well," said Margaret dubiously, "I suppose every age has its pleasures."

"Yes," he answered, "and my dear respected relative has her special pleasures; she has a sharp eye for detecting flaws in her fellow-creatures, and as keen a scent for a scandal as a hound has for blood; and, old as she is, she'll run it down too."

"Oh! she's looking at me; she's coming this way," exclaimed Margaret, shrinking away.

"You'll have to undergo the ordeal of an introduction presently—not now; see, she has passed."

"If I must, I must," she answered ruefully, "and I'll try to make a favourable impression."

Anyone looking on her at that moment might well have wondered if she could fail to make an impression on anyone who had eyes to see or a soul to appreciate a woman's loveliness. The dew of youth lay upon her face as sunshine rests upon a flower, drawing forth its invisible sweetness. Cecil Slade had a great appreciation of female charms; as a rule he regarded them with an artist's eyes, and raved about them with a poet's tongue; but there was a subtle something in this girl's face that he had

never seen in any other woman; yet he could not have told her so. His tongue was glib enough in uttering soft flattering phrases to such women as loved to hear them, but he could not for his life have framed a complimentary speech for her ears. He felt her beauty, he could not speak of it. Hers was just the kind of face that would have a dangerous fascination for him; he knew that, and considering all surrounding circumstances, he resolved, as a point of honour, to keep out of her way. In one of the brief pauses in their conversation, she looked up in his face, as though struck by a sudden thought.

"You have come here like any other visitor to-night; don't you generally live here?" she said.

"No," he answered. "I left the shelter of my mother's wing years ago."

"Oh!" she rejoined, looking rather in-

quisitively at him, "then I suppose you are —married?"

"Married? Good heavens—no!" he answered, flashing a full glance down upon her. "How could you for a moment think anything so absurd? The idea of my marrying anybody!"

There was a curl upon his lip that slightly ruffled her.

"I don't see why you shouldn't," she answered; "you're old enough—I mean, you're not particularly young."

"Umph!" he exclaimed, looking at her with a half-amused smile. "How old am I?"

"Well," she answered, regarding him with a rather saucy scrutinising air, "you are not grey, you are not bald, you are not wrinkled, but I should say you are over thirty. Yes, decidedly over thirty."

"Should you really?"

She was not quite sure whether he was annoyed at her little piece of guess work or not, so she hastened to answer him.

"I know men are not so foolish about their ages as women are; besides, many people like men who are a little oldish best —*I* do."

"I don't think men return that compliment to the fairer sex," he answered. "I should prefer the early bloom to the full-blown flower; but, as a rule, I object to women."

"Do you?" she exclaimed in a slightly mortified tone; "at any rate, the world would not get on very well without them."

"I don't know; if they had never been invented, we should have been spared a great deal of trouble. Now, here comes the kind of woman I adore," he added in a whisper, as Mrs. Granville Burke, accom-

panied by her brother, Colonel Dunstable, came, with recognising smiles and bows, towards the cosy nook where Mr. Slade and Margaret had ensconced themselves. She could not help the blush rising on her cheeks, nor the deepening expression of her eyes as this man, whom she had merely seen for a few brief moments in the morning, came near her. Neither the blush nor the brightening eyes passed unnoticed by her companion; he glanced keenly from one to the other, but made no comment. However, before Colonel Dunstable could be safely convoyed to her side, he was waylaid and surrounded by a numerous party of rejoicing friends, who were apparently as much surprised as pleased at his unexpected re-appearance in society. There was a great deal of hand-shaking and cordial greeting interchanged among them, and in the course of a few moments he was seen

with a blonde beauty on his arm, going on a foraging expedition towards the refreshment-room.

"That's always the way when Dunstable turns up," Slade whispered confidentially to Margaret; "the poor beggar happens to be rich and a bachelor, and society never will let him alone. Wherever he goes, he is attacked in front and rear by the army of British matrons; they pave the way for their daughters, who come up like a party of light skirmishers, and try to fight their way and capture and take him to the altar, but somehow he escapes. You saw that cargo of iced loveliness on his arm?"

"I thought her a very beautiful lady!" shocked at his irreverent way of speaking of any member of that society which she regarded with sentiments of awe, respect, and wonder.

"Well, a very little of that sort of beauty

goes a great way," he answered; "it is like eating a plum bun—we soon have enough of it."

"And yet I heard you say that a beautiful woman was the thing best worth looking at in all the world."

"Yes; the unadulterated article—when you find it," he answered cynically.

"You need not emphasise the 'when;' I am sure it is not so very rare—only look round you."

"Too many manufactured charms and too little original loveliness—no nature, all art; people make up their faces and figures too. Look at that girl, she would be pretty and attractive enough if she let herself alone; but you can't tell the colour of her skin, the pearl powder lies so thick upon it—I don't think she could even blush through it."

"How severe and unkind you are!" she

said, reproachfully, "I shouldn't wonder if you say the same thing of me."

"Don't fib," he answered, bending his head down that he might get a more complete view of her face; "you know you would wonder very much."

He spoke so decidedly, and yet in so soft and impressive a voice that she could not contradict him; a pink blush, like the reflection of a rose tint, gradually overspread her cheeks, and she turned her head slightly away, fully conscious, however, that she was being looked at by eyes which said more in their mute language than the tongue would have chosen to utter. The curving lines of her graceful throat, as she turned away, were almost as attractive to his artistic eyes as the sweet face itself. He saw her embarrassment, for which there was no visible cause, and somehow it touched him slightly, and for a moment he too was

silent. He felt the pause growing awkward between them, and presently broke it, saying,

"By-the-by, it is quite a wonder you did not see George to-night; he and I are chumming together, you know, and I wanted to bring him with me."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because he is not well; I left him in bed with a roll of mustard round his throat, stinging like mad, he said."

"Poor dear Georgy!" she exclaimed, sympathetically, "tell him I'll come and see him to-morrow; father said he would write to him, and send him my address."

"He has not done so, then," said Mr. Slade; "but I will carry home the news, and surprise him as much as you surprised me."

"Be sure you tell him I'll see him to-morrow."

"Humph!" said Mr. Slade, dubiously,

"I don't know about that. I doubt if the maternal authority here will approve of your visiting our bachelor quarters."

"Why not?" inquired Margaret, quickly; "the quarters, as you call them, which are good enough for my brother are surely good enough for me."

"That does not follow; but here comes my mother, to scold me, no doubt, for having monopolized you so long."

"I like being monopolized," she answered, "especially as I am such a stranger, and know nobody."

"You will soon know everybody," he rejoined, "and I shall be thrust into the background, though, perhaps, you may find time to throw me a word, as you would throw a bone to a dog."

"Shall I?" she answers, as her whole face dimples, and all broke into an enchanting smile. "Oh, Lady Erlescliffe!" she added,

as that lady appeared beside them, "Mr. Slade and I know each other, he has been to our house in Clinton!"

Lady Erlescliffe could not help a look of momentary surprise coming into her face, though she was too well-bred to express surprise at anything. She merely smiled and answered,

"Well, you have, at least, had ample time to renew your acquaintance; now, Cecil, go and make yourself agreeable elsewhere, I want Miss Siward for some special introductions."

She sailed away; Margaret smiled a regretful farewell to Cecil Slade, and followed in her wake. The special introductions were to be made to Lord and Lady Norreys, and to Colonel Dunstable. Lady Erlescliffe whispered to Margaret as they went along—

"I am going to introduce you to my

brother and sister, my dear; be your sweetest self, I want them to take to you."

Of course this little exordium made the young girl feel more shy and nervous than she would otherwise have done, but she was carried up to the party in question, and went through the introduction without any of that *gaucherie* and awkward embarassment which often accompany shyness.

Lord Norreys' shrewd face relaxed into an approving smile as she was presented to him, and he said a few gracious and kindly words to her, all the small sympathies of his nature being enlisted in her favour. He could not help admitting to himself that the girl would grace his sister's chaperonage, though his pride rebelled against its conditions. Lady Norreys regarded her through her glasses, and received her with a frozen, stony smile. Like a *parvenue*, as she was, she resented the idea of anyone opening

the doors of society with a golden key as she had done, and, if she could hold sway, would have been far more exclusive than the really nobly born and bred; but even the icicles which fell in frozen sentences from her lips gradually melted under the influence of the young girl's warm and radiant beauty. She was not allowed to linger many minutes in the company of this illustrious pair. Lady Erlescliffe shuffled her guests as though they were a pack of animated cards, sorting and dealing them out one to another, as she thought best for the success of the game and pleasure of the players.

Colonel Dunstable was one of her most highly favoured guests; he and his sister, Mrs. Burke, had somehow drifted apart, and he had been driven to call in the aid of Lady Erlescliffe, so resolved was he to gain a special introduction to Margaret. She was

equally pleased to be introduced to him, for they had been mutually impressed, though not perhaps in the same degree. She wanted to talk to him, or to hear him talk; she wondered if she would be able to find her way through his words to the mystery of his life—the reason why he shunned society when he was apparently so well fitted to shine in it. She was doomed to learn the mystery one day, but not then.

Colonel Dunstable used his eyes more than his tongue, during the time that he and Margaret were strolling about together, as in and out of the refreshment-room they went; he stared at her solemnly while she ate an ice, then invited her to sit on the cool landing, where there was plenty of air. "He hated crowds," he said; "the fumes of overheated humanity mingling together with the perfume of flowers and Piesse and

Lubin's manufactured scents are enough to make one ill; let us sit here and make friends with one another. I only came for the sake of making friends with you."

Somehow, although, as a rule, Margaret was not slow with her tongue, she could not answer him as she would have answered any other man. They sat there for a time almost in silence. He made no attempt to restore her to her legitimate chaperon, and when his sister approached he warned her away with a look. He stared at Margaret with a strange, weird light in his eyes, that had an almost mesmeric effect on her. She could not bear it; the lids drooped heavily over her eyes, the beating of her heart quickened, her cheeks flushed, and she felt restless and uncomfortable. She made an effort to shake off her feelings, and more than once tried to draw him into conversation, to make him talk of himself, but he

was not responsive; he answered her questions, and nothing more.

They certainly did not "get on well together," as it was phrased, though they were strangely drawn to one another, and were both sympathetically inclined. The little he did say was quaint in phraseology, though, perhaps, obscure in meaning, too obscure, as a rule, for her either to follow or fully comprehend him. She felt he was a specimen of something different from any of the other gentlemen she had talked to; they had all been glib enough with their tongues, and common-place enough in their remarks; as, indeed, it is very difficult to be anything but common-place on such occasions, when people are thrown together for a brief space of time, liable at any moment to drift apart again. Margaret felt his eyes upon her, and racked her brain to try and think of something to say, but she

could think of nothing but the most trivial observations which were not worth saying. Presently she was released from her difficulty by his again addressing her.

"I am sure we must have met somewhere before," he said; "do I understand that this is really your first visit to town?"

"Yes, my very first," she answered, glad to find her tongue unloosed at last—"at least, I have passed through London from station to station, but have never stayed here."

"I am sure we have met," he continued, as though racking his brain for an answer, rather than seeking one from her.

"Then I am sure I do not know where it could have been," rejoined Margaret briskly, feeling sure they were drifting into some smooth, conversational haven at last.

"Perhaps it was in dreamland," he added, and he looked as though he were

half-dreaming as he spoke; then suddenly he seemed to pull his senses together, and smiled at her with those strange, haunting eyes as he said, "but I shall startle you if I talk of myself or of my theories; when a man separates himself from the common herd of humanity, and refuses to follow in their footsteps, they howl him down; or if he has any ideas of mind or matter contrary to the commonly received opinions, they would like to hand him over to the common executioner."

"Hardly as bad as that," she answered, feeling her ground cautiously; "in these days people are only punished for what they do, not for what they think."

"You are still wandering in the valley of ignorance," he answered, "you will know better when you get to the end of it."

"How are you, Dunstable? heard you'd dropped out of the world an age ago!" ex-

claimed Mr. Slade, lounging up from behind them, and sauntering on by their side. "But I have interrupted your conversation. May I ask who it is that is still wandering in the valley of ignorance—or innocence, I did not quite catch the word. Is it you, Miss Siward?"

"So Colonel Dunstable says," she answers, smiling, though scarcely well-pleased at being interrupted at that moment.

"Well, I hope you'll stay there," said Mr. Slade, "till I or some other equally beneficent being beckon you out of it and lead you through the wilder woods of reason."

The conversation, which had seemed to be turning the way she wished it to go, was arrested in its course; for now that Mr. Slade had joined them, there would be no chance of its drifting back to the same point—for that evening, at least.

Lady Erlescliffe's reception was regarded as a brilliant success. The grace and beauty of her young *protegée* were accepted as facts, concerning which there was little doubt expressed; which is more than can be said in the case of many beauties. As a rule, when a new star appears in the social hemisphere, there is a great discussion in the camp—some doubt, some quibble over it and pick it to pieces; some deny it altogether. However, Margaret Siward being of quite a different type from the stereotyped belles of the season, underwent no comparison with them, and so escaped a large amount of criticism and censure.

It was long past midnight, verging on the small hours of the morning, when the last carriage rolled from the door.

Colonel Dunstable handed his sister into her brougham and sprang in after her. She laughingly congratulated herself on leading

him captive into the jaws of society again. He scarcely answered her, but let her talk on for a time; then suddenly seizing her hand, he exclaimed,

"If ever I marry, that girl shall be my wife!"

"What girl?" exclaimed Mrs. Granville Burke, amazed.

"The lady I have been talking to—the lady I came here purposely to see—Miss Siward," he answered, as coolly as though the matter was an arranged fact.

"How absurd, Sidney! *you* are not reduced to the necessity of marrying for money," remarked the lady.

"Thank God!—no," he answered fervently.

"For what, then, would you marry such a girl as this?" she rejoined. "You know nothing of her except that she has a pretty face!" Her features relaxed into a smile as

she added, "Besides, there must be always two to the matrimonial bargain, and I fancy there is a dangerous rival in the field."

"I shall marry her, nevertheless," he answered decidedly.

"What, whether she will or no?"

"Ay, whether she will or no," he said. "We have very little to do in the matter ourselves; it was all arranged for us long ago."

He relapsed into silence, and leaning back in the carriage closed his eyes. She regarded him with an anxious, scrutinising gaze. What could he mean? Who had arranged it long ago? He was often mysterious and strange, but now he soared utterly beyond her comprehension. She knew it was useless to question him farther, but she hoped that by the morning he would have slept away his fancy and forgotten it altogether.

CHAPTER II.

"DOES HE LOVE ME?"

WHEN there is a great deal of ground to be gone over in a short space of time, it is impossible to loiter by the way to gather wild flowers, or peep into every cosy nook and corner that tempts us to wander from the direct road; however pleasant it might be to linger in sweet, shady ways, away from the dusty road and out of the sun's glare, we must go on, nor stop to rest, nor even draw rein until the journey's end.

So, when one has to tell the story of a life tinged with the bright or sombre lines

of other lives, it is impossible in a few short hours, or a few score of pages, either to tell or write all we know; we can only keep to the great facts which have been the invisible landmarks, or turning-points, whence all the joy or sorrow has arisen; of the short stages or many winding ways by which such points were gained we can say but little.

It is only the smallest and most insignificant portion of our lives we live in the sight of men; the greater and deeper part we live in silence and we live alone. The outer current of events and circumstances, with their strange coincidences and combinations, flows freely out into the world's highway, and often makes the wonder of a passing hour. Society talks freely of our doings, is alternately surprised, shocked, or delighted; it pities, envies, or condemns, and—then forgets us, for the next bubble

that rises and bursts within its narrow sphere; it cannot busy itself with anything or anybody for long together. Our friends, drawn within a narrower circle, nearer to us, canvass our actions in a kindly or acrimonious spirit, according to their individual moods, and sit gravely down to find out the why or the wherefore, of this course of conduct, or of that; they strive to find out the motives as well as to judge the act. They are always so much wiser in the matter than we ourselves, whom the matter most concerns.

The mainspring which sets our lives in motion, is formed of such minute and subtle particles, the machinery of thought and air-drawn theories and sentiments is so intricate, and the whole working of our mind is so mysteriously crossed and recrossed by shifting thoughts, and hopes and fears, that we cannot always ourselves descend into our

own hearts and discover the motive which directs our acts, and we often deceive ourselves desperately in the matter wherein lies our whole life's mystery.

It is impossible to follow Margaret Siward through all the routine of her daily life; she lived in the world and for the world, and developed wonderful powers of enjoyment. Her days and nights passed in a continual round of pleasure, such hard-working, wearying pleasures as society provides for itself in the London season, though it often sinks down jaded and heart-sick at the end of it. Excitement supplied Margaret with artificial strength, which served her in good stead as the weeks rolled on, and night after night found her still untired treading the same mill-wheel of pleasure, grinding many small experiences, and some sweet, tender grain, letting the chaff and folly blow away with the breath that made it. Her life was

full of little pleasure, but little pains came slowly creeping in; sometimes she pricked her fingers with society's full-blown roses, and in the busy rounds of pleasure which filled her days and hours she found petty disappointments continually cropping up here and there, which spoilt her enjoyment. and took the flavour out of things she expected to find most sweet.

Her face soon grew familiar to the frequenters of the Row; she went everywhere. Lady Erlescliffe herself presented her at the first drawing-room which was held at St. James's after her arrival in town. Lady Erlescliffe was indefatigable in fulfilling her duty as chaperon; sometimes Margaret wished that chaperons had never been invented. She chaperoned her to balls, parties, picture-galleries and kettle-drums with untiring energy, and watched over her, and guarded her with a care which soon

grew irksome to the girl, who had all her life been accustomed to perfect freedom. Occasionally, not often, she clashed with Lady Erlescliffe, but when she did take up the glove she fought and gained the victory. She was modest and unassuming, and held society in profound respect, and was quite willing to conduct herself according to its codes within its own limits; but she would not be bound never to go beyond them.

There was a great deal of self-will and determination of purpose in this young girl who had such soft, kittenish ways, and bore no sign of rebellion on her fair, open brow. She had been so accustomed to ramble about the country, free as a wild bird, at home, that she could not bear to be shut in by the London streets, and forbidden to go into the park for a solitary saunter. Lady Erlescliffe never walked, at least never

went for a constitutional, in London; and Margaret could not bear to be attended, wherever she went, by a stately man or maid-servant. It was all very well for the first few weeks, when she was a stranger; but as the days rolled on she panted for greater freedom—to fly away somewhere to be alone; for alone she never was, except while she was sleeping.

She got up early one morning, threw open her window, and looked out over the park. It looked so still, so peaceful, bathed in the early sunshine, with its grand old trees fully clothed now with their Summer foliage, gently swaying to and fro in the fresh morning air, and the Serpentine glittering and sparkling in the sunshine, curving through the soft green grass. She could not see the white swans or water-fowl upon its breast, but she knew that they were there. It looked so beautiful, so

different from its general aspect, when the gay crowds swarm upon the green sward, and fill the whole scene with life and bustle. She was sorely tempted to go out and bask in the sunshine. She dressed hurriedly, and before the household was astir. She forgot her late learned lessons of propriety and etiquette, and went scampering across the park, and fed the swans, while the dew was on the grass and the whole London world was fast asleep. She thoroughly enjoyed herself; all the more, perhaps, because she knew she was indulging in a forbidden luxury.

She got home, however, with eyes sparkling and cheeks aglow with fresh air and exercise, in time to pour out Lady Erlescliffe's coffee; and having propitiated her with a cup of the steaming beverage, she acknowledged her transgression, and sat demurely waiting for the gentle scolding

which she knew would follow her confession.

"I wish you would not do such foolish things, Margaret," the lady said gravely; "it is not the custom for young girls to go about alone; I have told you so before. If you must go out, take Jane or Evans."

"Ah! if they would only talk, or have a race with me to the Serpentine, I would; but they are so stiff, so solemn, when you send them out with me, I feel as though I were in custody, being marched round a prison-yard. Dear Lady Erlescliffe," she said, with her most winning accents and sweetest smile, "I love to have a solitary ramble! I do no harm, and I feel so free."

"But suppose you were to meet anyone?"

"I shouldn't mind; if it was anybody nice, perhaps they might join me in my ramble on the banks of the Serpentine. *I* think it would be rather"—she was going to

utter the word "jolly," but as that expressive slang term shocked Lady Erlescliffe's sensitive ears, she substituted the tamer and more correct word "pleasant."

"Hush! child, don't talk so! You don't know how you may injure your prospects by such out-of-the-way doings."

"Injure my prospects!" a puzzled look came into the girl's laughing eyes; "how could I possibly injure anything or anybody by simply taking a quiet stroll in the earliest, sweetest part of the day? in such a harmless place as Hyde Park, too!"

"The very place, of all others, where you ought not to be seen *alone*. Suppose—not that it is likely—but suppose you were to meet any of our common friends, what would they, what could they think of you?"

"Most likely they would think I was a very sensible girl, and would feel inclined to follow my example."

"Most likely they would do nothing of the kind!" rejoined Lady Erlescliffe, irritated by her manner; "nobody would believe that a young girl in your position would choose to go strolling about alone for her own pleasure only."

"For whose pleasure, then?"

"By such foolish, unusual conduct, you lay yourself open to a very grave suspicion. It is a very cruel, ill-natured world, Margaret, and a young, beautiful girl like you cannot be too circumspect in your behaviour."

"But, dear Lady Erlescliffe, what have I done?" exclaimed Margaret, alarmed at the grave solemnity of her manner; "hearing you talk, anyone might think I had been guilty of something actually wicked and wrong. I cannot see that I have done anything to deserve any blame at all."

The tears came into her eyes, and her

pretty Cupid's bow of a mouth made a little pout of vexation.

"I went out," she added, "because the sun and the fresh, brisk breeze tempted me; I liked it, and I felt happy and light-hearted till I came home, and you make me miserable just for nothing at all."

"I do not want to make you miserable, my dear," said Lady Erlescliffe, in just such accents as she would use to a petted child. "I only want you to know how the world regards such matters."

"Well, and how does it?" asked Margaret, a little curiously, blinking away her tears, but quite ready to give a defiant answer to whatever the world might think.

"In the first place, it might think, and rightly, that you expose yourself to unnecessary annoyance, perhaps insult, going about alone and unprotected——"

"As thousands of women and girls who

work for their bread have to do every day of their lives; and in a civilised land, being alone and unprotected should be no cause for annoyance and insult—on the contrary; but what else?"

"Some might say, or might think, that you went out to keep some appointment—some secret stolen meeting with some forbidden friend whom you dare not——"

"Hush!" exclaimed Margaret, the danger signal flashing from her eyes, "I will not hear you even hint such things to me! If I thought anyone could so cruelly misconstrue or slander me with such a thought, I would go away home and hide myself for ever."

She was evidently disposed to take the matter more seriously than Lady Erlescliffe intended; she only meant to hinder her repeating what, regarding things from her point of view, she considered a rash and

foolish thing, which might lay her open to censorious remarks. She saw she had gone the wrong way to work, and instead of taming her to submission, stung her into more open rebellion; so she tacked about and sailed in an opposite direction.

"You take me too seriously, dear child; I do not quite mean all I say. You are too high-spirited and pure-minded, too well liked, and altogether too great a favourite for anyone really to misconstrue you, though they might naturally be led to express some slight disapproval of conduct they are not accustomed to see. What I want you to understand, Margaret, is that *I* am held accountable for you; if anything went wrong with you, all the blame would fall on me. *I* am your temporary guardian, and am responsible for you in every way; you are very young and unaccustomed to the world."

"I don't care for the world."

"But we must all care for the opinion of the world we live in, or we must withdraw from it. You are placed in my charge, and it is my duty to teach and train you in the world's ways; if you run counter to advice, and by conduct, however harmless in itself, challenge society on its own grounds, when you are only just admitted within its circle, you must not be surprised if it criticises you severely; and, my dear Margaret, remember any infringement of society's stringent laws on your part will be visited on me; for any foolish thing you do, *I* shall be blamed as too lax a guardian. Out of consideration for *me*, I am sure you will give up any little fancy of your own—for my sake."

"For your sake, dear Lady Erlescliffe, I would promise almost anything," exclaimed Margaret, the right chord in her nature being lightly touched; the idea of any pos-

sible reflection being cast upon another for any fault of hers vanquished her at once. "I have been so used to do exactly what I like, that the petty restraints and general strait-lacedness of society worry me; and sometimes I cannot help breaking loose just a little; but I will not vex you again—at least, I'll try not," added conscientious Margaret, too prudent to give a promise in full, when any hour she might be tempted to break it. On the whole, in spite of those "petty restraints" which she occasionally, in theory more than practice, rebelled against, the new life suited her, and she suited it, and fell into its easier, pleasanter ways naturally enough.

In the midst of her town gaieties, however much her time was occupied, she never omitted writing a long despatch home every week, giving a detailed account of her doings, dwelling especially on such things as she

thought would most interest the household at home. She knew her epistles would be religiously read over, and all the little facts and scraps of London life scrutinized and commented upon by her proud, fond father. She could fancy his inviting the whole Kestrel family to this literary entertainment, and Nelly, dear, blind Nelly! Margaret rarely wrote to her direct, as Robert was away, so her father had told her; he merely stated the fact, and nothing more; thus, if she had written to Nell, there was no one to read her letters, now her brother was away, except the old people, and Margaret did not choose them to be her interpreters; so she sent long messages and special scraps of information, which she believed her father faithfully delivered, as indeed he did. He knew how his darling loved the blind girl, and for her sake determined to show every attention and kindness to Nelly. He regularly sent for

her to come up to the house, and would have her in his study, and read Margaret's letters to her from beginning to end, and talk them over, and listen to her comments and her sympathetic expressions of interest in all that concerned his darling.

Somehow he could talk to Nell on the subject of his absent treasure as he could talk to no one else. Kestrel himself was unsympathetic and cold, sometimes caustic, in his remarks, but never pleasant. Mr Siward's heart so overflowed when he received Margaret's letters, he was so proud of her and her doings, that he could not help entertaining his old friend with their contents, though he knew some irritating remark would come at the end. With Nelly it was different; they both loved and sorely missed the absent one, the bare mention of her name was sweet and pleasant to them. Nelly listened, with her

soul in her ears, to every word that came from Margaret's pen; she tried to trace in them something more than was expressed by the mere words themselves; she listened for some stray expression that would give her a glimpse into Margaret's inner self, that part of her and her spirit life which she could not commit to paper—but she watched in vain. It was very evident that she was in the full swing of a life of pleasure, whether it was fully satisfying or whether there was any unattainable thing hidden away in the background, for which she reached and longed in vain, there was no word to tell.

In her first letter she had told them of the strange coincidence that Lady Erlescliffe's son should happen to be her brother George's friend, who had paid that brief flying visit to Clinton."

Nelly listened with all her soul to every

word Margaret had written on that subject. Whenever she painted a picture of Margaret, in her vivid imagination, Mr. Slade was always the figure that occupied the foreground. During the few brief hours she had passed in their company, she had listened to every word they spoke, had noted the intonation of their voices, nay the very sound of their footsteps, nothing escaped her ears; inasmuch as the outer world was shrouded from her actual sight, her vivid imagination, the eyes of her soul, if the term might be allowed, seemed doubly keen to penetrate into the secret yearning and longings which lie hidden away deep down in the inner life where the world's eyes never reach, the worldly-wise men never find their way. Her very love for Margaret made her sensitively alive to everything concerning her. Whatever touched Margaret, whether near or far off, had a sig-

nificance to Nelly, though, perhaps, for no one else.

Almost unconsciously to herself, she pieced together stray scraps and fragments of thought and feeling which she had caught from Margaret's lips, and combining them with her own imaginings, from small things drew great deductions, which might or might not be true; time alone could settle that. Beyond the limited household duties which she was able to perform, and her care for her morose, though to her always tender, father, her world lay centred in Margaret's life; all the feminine sentiments and sensibilities and romance of her nature revolved round Margaret, who was the source and fountain of all the poetry of her life—all else was the merest prose. She had felt from the first that Margaret and Mr. Slade must necessarily meet in London; the simple fact of his intimacy with George

Siward promised so much; but that he should be the son of her fashionable guardian and friend took Nelly quite by surprise.

They must be frequently thrown together, she thought, under his mother's roof there would be such great facilities for their meetings, and she wondered how things were going between them, and grew irritable and restless as the days rolled on, and Margaret's letters came one after the other, filled with details of all manner of worldly vanities. She sent such vivid pen and ink sketches of the different people she met that they, in that far away spot, felt on quite friendly terms with great celebrities, men of mark whose names had been long familiar to their ears; it was almost beyond belief that they and Margaret met bodily face to face, and talked and laughed together like ordinary mortals. She wrote freely enough of things and people, but of Cecil Slade, beyond that

one brief mention, she never said a word—Nelly watched and waited for a sign, but she watched and waited in vain.

Her imagination, however, was quite at fault when she fancied that Margaret's residence with Lady Erlescliffe would facilitate her interviews with Mr. Slade; it was the very thing that kept them farther apart. His visits to Kensington were even more rare than ever. When his mother, and sometimes Margaret, playfully reproached him for neglecting them, and indeed occasionally refusing his escort at times when Lady Erlescliffe especially desired it, he generally answered curtly that "he was too hard at work, he had no time to fritter away on fashionable fooleries," as he irreverently termed the doings of the feminine world.

On more than one occasion Margaret felt hurt at the pertinacious way in which he

seemed to avoid her; in her heart she could not help feeling that he really did avoid her. One day she seized her opportunity and told him so; he did not attempt to deny the charge; he only smiled, rather cynically, she thought, and relapsed into a silence which was all the more provoking as up to that time they had been getting on delightfully, having more than usually pleasant conversation.

"Well," she added, after a pause, "you might say something; it is very unpleasant for me to feel that you stay away from your mother's house because of me."

"I do not stay away because of you, but because of myself," he answered. He could not bear to see her vexed, and he saw she was really hurt; there was no coquettish, playful pretence in the matter; she was as yet too natural and unspoilt to pretend anything, though she was learning the world's

lesson fast enough; she did not say one thing and mean another.

"Why because of yourself?" she said, echoing his words, and regarding him with naïve, inquiring simplicity in her eyes. "I don't see what possible harm you could get coming here, and it would be so pleasant for your mother to have you here oftener."

"And would it be very pleasant to anybody else?" The words rose so quickly to his lips that he could not keep them back, and there came into his soft brown eyes the look she had seen there under the green orchard trees at home—it was a look which she could not quite interpret, though it set her heart fluttering in her breast, and through her whole invisible nature sent a delicious thrill, to which she gave no name; it was a sensation that no other man's eyes called up, but she had no name to give it. She was not given to introspection, never

looked into her heart to see if anything new was born into it, or anything fresh taken out of it. Occasionally the vague possibilities of the future occupied her thoughts, but as a rule her mental scope of vision was filled by the present hours. As she answered Cecil Slade now, she could not help a slight flush stealing over her face, nor a soft light filling her eyes, but she answered him frankly and truly,

"You mean, would it be pleasant to me? Well, yes, I think it would be very nice if you were here always."

"*I* think so too," he answered, with that soft inflection of tone which had, from the first moment she heard his voice, so great an attraction for her; "but the nicest and pleasantest things are not always good for us. Eve did not swallow all the forbidden fruit, remember; she left enough behind to set men's hearts aching and longing till the

end of their lives. If I were to come too often, I might fall in love with you, and what would the world say?"

Margaret thought it would not matter what the world said; it was too divine a possibility to be contemplated calmly, but she would not let him see she thought so. It was very evident that he attached great importance to the world's opinion; in so slight a matter even he was afraid to face it. Though her pulse beat like a sledge-hammer, and into her face the feelings of her heart flashed up sudden and strong, and in unwritten language revealed more than words could tell; she answered him with a calm, almost brusque indifference, which, however, was not calculated to mislead a practised eye, though she looked away and played with a tasselled cushion as she spoke.

"As there is no chance of such a ridicu-

lous thing happening, the world could not say much about the matter."

"Of course it would be ridiculous for two people like us to think of falling in love with each other; you young, rich, and beautiful; *I* poor, and, as you say, oldish." She felt ashamed and distressed as he repeated her foolish words, but she did not notice the twinkle in his eyes as he uttered them, adding—"But as such ridiculous things do sometimes happen, it is best to be on the safe side—best for us both, little Madge. Ah, it is George's fault!"—his accents changed quickly—"he always calls you Madge, and somehow *I* fall into it."

"I hope you will fall into it again, then," she said, "for I like it."

The danger signal was gradually rising in both their hearts; *he* knew it, and by an adroit turn of a phrase he glided away from the rocks whereon they were fast drifting

into the haven of common chit-chat; yet no words that passed between them were ever common-place; there was generally an indefinable something which redeemed them from that.

During the rest of the day and evening she seemed to be treading on air; she could not think or talk steadily upon any subject. If she was spoken to, she answered in the wrong place, or said the wrong thing; and when she went to her room that night, she arraigned herself before herself, and went through a cross-examination, strictly private and untranslateable. Why did her foolish heart flutter when he spoke to her? Why did she think of him, and long for the sound of his voice, and feel sick and disappointed on the many days when he came not? Even if they only met in the world for a moment, she was happier and richer for a passing smile. She recalled and reviewed

before her mind's eye every second of their many meetings, dwelling more upon his looks and tones than on his words. She wondered if he looked and spoke to other girls as he looked and spoke to her?

In the loneliness and silence of her own room she hid her blushing face in her hands; a quiver of tremulous joy shook her frame; the idea gradually grew into a thought—a hope; perhaps it was love of her which kept him from his mother's home! If—if he loved her, she thought, what heaven could God make equal to this world of ours?

Before she slept that night the veil fell from before her eyes, and slowly the revelation came to her that from the first hour of their meeting he had taken silent, secret possession of her whole heart and soul. She knew it now. She would have doubted, perhaps denied it yesterday, but not now.

As she sat there alone, thinking of him—only of him—she felt that a new something had been born into her life, and knew, too—or believed she knew—that there was but one man in all the world for her, and that was Cecil Slade.

CHAPTER III.

INTERLUDES.

IT was some days—indeed, some weeks—before Margaret and Cecil Slade had another quiet *tête-à-tête* together. For awhile expectation stood on tip-toe; every day she watched and waited for him; every time the bell rang her heart leapt to the sound like a hound to the lash of a whip. She listened for his quick footsteps on the stairs—for he always bounded up two at a time; but to the hot flush of hope day after day succeeded the dull chill of disappointment.

Smiling society faces, with small chit-chat of the hour, came instead of him, and

passed away like shadows on the wall; then she got vexed and angry, and made up her mind that he cared nothing for her, or he would not, after all she had said to him, keep away; therefore she would think no more of him—as though she could help thinking!—or as though love, once born into a life. could be strangled and put out of it by the mere force of will. It may be hidden away out of sight, laid to rest for a time, but it lives still, thrives, fattens, and grows strong, till the power of natural magic, which first gave it birth, bids it "arise and come forth."

Even Lady Erlescliffe noticed how fitful and restless Margaret seemed, and inquired if she was expecting "news from home;" or "perhaps it is some special visitor you are waiting for?" she added. No, Margaret said; there were no letters due from home, and she was not expecting anybody to call;

but from the moment she found Lady Erlescliffe's attention was attracted, she roused herself, and amused herself with every light, passing pleasure; yet in spite of her sparkling eyes and merry chatter, her heart sickened, and watched and waited still.

In the meantime she was surrounded by admirers of one kind or another, all more or less eligible, some seriously inclined, standing on the brink of a proposal, but not quite prepared to take the final plunge; she treated all alike, and seemed to favour no one in particular, except—well, perhaps Colonel Dunstable stood, or seemed to stand, a trifle nearer to her than the rest. He had become her very shadow; wherever she went, he was sure to be in attendance; he carried her shawl, took care of her fan, and held her bouquet while she was dancing; if any difficulty lay in her path of pleasure,

he was instrumental in its removal; if she expressed a wish in his hearing, through him, either directly or indirectly, the wish was gratified. On one special, indeed, a national occasion, she had a strong desire to go to the Opera; Lady Erlescliffe did her best to gratify her, but not a box, not a stall was to be got; though they tried through every legitimate channel to obtain either, it was without success.

At the eleventh hour, when Margaret, spoilt child as she was, had subsided into a stage of fretful impatience, Mrs. Burke appeared upon the scene, to offer Margaret a seat in her box.

"Dear Lady Erlescliffe," she added, "I am sorry, but I cannot think of offering you a fourth seat in the box; my brother, of course, takes the third place—he must escort us."

"Don't mention it, pray," she answered.

"It was only for Margaret's sake I wished to go at all. If she is pleased, I am quite satisfied to stay at home; indeed, I shall be glad of an evening's quiet. We have been keeping terribly late hours, and they are beginning to tell upon me. It is many years since I have had such a gay season as this."

"Very trying, of course," said Mrs. Burke sympathetically, "but then, you know, it is the dear girl's first season, and naturally she is anxious to make the most of it. She is paying you a delightfully long visit. Will she be remaining here when the season is over?"

"Possibly," replied Lady Erlescliffe, "indeed, most probably she will remain with me through the Winter."

"Really! Well, she is a sweet girl; she seems to have dropped amongst us from the skies. Strange, isn't it, nobody seems to know anything about her? I think you

told me (though her father is in some sort of trade now) that she was one of the Devonshire Siwards, formerly from Ottery, St. Mary?"

"No," replied Lady Erlescliffe, smiling, determined to baffle her inquisitor, "I don't think you received that bit of information from me. You must have gathered it from some other quarter."

"Perhaps so. Speaking confidentially, you know, of course, that there is a great deal of gossip going on. When a young girl, so beautiful, and reported rich, suddenly appears under *your* auspices, naturally the world will talk, and wonder who she is, and where she comes from."

"That she does appear under my auspices is, I think, a sufficient guarantee that she is worthy of all that society can give her. If anyone has the right or inclination to make any special or private inquiries concerning

her, I am in a position to give them every information, but to the mere tittle-tattle and inquisitorial gossip of society, I will contribute nothing." She spoke with rather severe hauteur, which might have silenced some people, but it had no such effect on Mrs. Burke, who rejoined, with a sagacious and approving smile,

"And quite right too. I hate tittle-tattle myself, still it exists, we cannot deny that; but, as I said only this morning, 'Depend upon it, Lady Erlescliffe knows what she is about, she is not a person to be easily imposed upon, and she is the last person in the world who would impose upon *us*.'"

With a strong and impressive accent she emphasized the word *us*, as though she in her own person represented society at large.

"I should like to know who it is that has taken the trouble to discuss my affairs

with you; although I am sure it is meant in the friendliest spirit, still I consider it an impertinent interference, which I shall resent in my own way," replied Lady Erlescliffe, speaking in a perfectly calm and courteous tone of voice, though the current of angry feeling was running hot and strong beneath her cool exterior. She was a woman of the world, and accustomed to fight beneath a masked battery of smiles and polite phrases.

"Dear Lady Erlescliffe, I hope you are not vexed," exclaimed Mrs. Granville Burke in conciliatory tones—"really there was no harm meant; we must talk about something, or what would our pleasant little kettledrums come to?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid, unless a due amount of scandal is daily provided to make them boil. I should like to know how many reputations are spotted, and how

many slanderous whispers are first buzzed and set in circulation round the tea-pot."

"Well, depend upon it, we all get smirched with the same brush; we all supply fuel for the same fire. By-the-by, are you going to the Drummonds' to-morrow?"

"No," replied Lady Erlescliffe; "I cannot do too much in one day, and Margaret does not care about it."

"I'm afraid you do over-exert your strength sometimes," said Mrs. Burke sympathetically. "If I can ever do anything to relieve you in any way, I do hope you will make use of me. You know I should be too happy at any time to replace you, so far as anyone could replace so"—she hesitated a second—"so very indulgent a chaperon."

"You think I am too lax with Margaret?" said Lady Erlescliffe quickly, and with a searching expression in her eyes.

"Oh, no, no!" she hastened to reply—"I should be sorry to say *that;* only, you know, lookers-on see more than players, and there may be too many drones buzzing about the pretty bee with the golden honey."

"I am really greatly obliged by the kind interest you take in Margaret," said Lady Erlescliffe blandly. "To what special drone are you now alluding?"

"Oh, we never mention names," exclaimed Mrs. Burke, with a little deprecatory shake of the head; "but in the very best society there is always a sprinkling of adventurers with full pedigrees and empty pockets."

A frown gathered on Lady Erlescliffe's brow as she answered with some hauteur,

"Gentlemen with full pedigrees, though unfortunately they may have empty pockets, can hardly be termed 'adventurers.'"

"Ah! dear Lady Erlescliffe, if you possibly can, you *will* always misunderstand me. I do not use the word 'adventurer' as an offensive term; every man is an adventurer when he goes into the matrimonial market, and every woman too, for she often ventures her all and loses it; and referring to dear Margaret, she has such winning, gentle ways, I'm afraid, from the little side-whisperings I hear, that she is misleading more than one of her many admirers. Dear, sweet girl though she is, one cannot help seeing that she is developing a great capacity for coquetry, and of a very dangerous kind, too."

"Most women develop that capacity at some period of their lives—some are born with it," replied Lady Erlescliffe indifferently, and resolved to ask no questions, but to confine herself to the simplest remarks possible. "Margaret's small flirtations are

perfectly harmless—they are too innocent and simple to be dangerous."

"I am not so sure of that," replied Mrs. Burke sapiently. "Of course, we are speaking in the strictest confidence, and I think it right to put you on your guard; but at one time I thought—I really did—that Mr. Slade was seriously *épris* in a certain quarter."

Lady Erlescliffe lost all patience; with great difficulty she curbed her tongue, and kept her wrath back under strong control. She longed to speak to this dear friend in terms such as the polite world never uses even to its dearest foes; for the open, honest warfare of vulgar folk is unknown in the circle wherein she moved; things, however hard and cruel, must be managed with surface smoothness and polish. She had seen people writhe beneath the torture inflicted by a smiling face masked by pleas-

ant courtesy, wounded to the death by polite phrases, stung by honeyed tongues, and driven to the depths of bitterness; there, standing at bay, with faces white and tremulous, though still wearing the soft society smile, hiding the spirit's pain, as the Spartan hid the fox beneath his robe, and smiled as it ate its way to his heart.

If she could only have got into a good honest rage now, expressed the feelings that were boiling and bubbling in her breast, have rung the bell and ordered Mrs. Burke to be shown out, she would have breathed more freely; but she dared not do that; it was better to have Mrs. Burke as a doubtful friend than as an acknowledged foe. She was a woman of some importance, too, and had great influence in the world around her. Lady Erlescliffe mentally resented the inquisitorial nature of her remarks, and felt she was prying too closely into her affairs,

and would not fail to make public whatever she fancied she discovered. It would be as well to secure her as an ally for Margaret, in whom she professed a great interest, and, indeed, had already shown in many ways a really kind regard for her. She wished to be wiser than other people, and to be enlightened on many matters where Lady Erlescliffe preferred she should be kept in darkness. She shrank from the idea of the world learning that there was any commercial tie between herself and Margaret; she wished their mutual positions to be regarded as a purely friendly arrangement; she knew that it was on this little secret Mrs. Burke's curiosity was centred, and this secret she resolved jealously to guard from her, if possible, without rousing any special remark.

She soon made up her mind which road to take; she turned her back on the most

tempting one—that of open warfare, and said, with some little annoyance, but still in a conciliatory spirit, laying her hand lightly on Mrs. Burke's arm as she spoke—

"Pray leave my son's name out of the question. I don't think it is fair to connect the names of any man or woman in the world. I could not bear to hear his name coupled with any woman's, especially with Margaret's. The very simplest friendship exists between them. I am his nearest friend, and ought to know."

Mrs. Burke saw that she spoke with perfect sincerity, so far as her own belief was concerned; but being convinced on a subject yourself, having the power to convince another is a very different matter.

"Well," she replied, still doubting, "I am glad to hear you speak so decidedly; but you know one's nearest friends are sometimes the farthest from our secrets."

"Ay, but please take my word in this," said Lady Erlescliffe earnestly. "If you should ever hear such a statement again—no matter who makes it—will you oblige me by contradicting it as decidedly as I contradict it now?"

"Oh! certainly, as you are so serious," she answered, "I certainly will, if I ever should hear such a statement, but at present the supposition is entirely my own, I merely mentioned it to you."

"Then pray do not mention it to anyone else. If such whispers as these go abroad, they sometimes cause strange complications."

"You may rely on my discretion; but you know the dear girl is bound to make a good match before the end of the season. I see the symptoms beginning in more than one direction, and no wonder, she is such a sweet girl, and such a favourite with every-

body too. She has quite bewitched my brother Sidney. Did you ever see a man so changed?"

Seeing she paused for an answer, Lady Erlescliffe felt bound to reply, so she answered cautiously,

"It is many seasons, I think, since he has been so much in society—he has always seemed to avoid it."

"A dozen years at least," replied Mrs. Burke. "He has been very eccentric for a long time past; just dashing up to town for a few weeks, and then suddenly going off like a comet, nobody knows where; but now he is going frantically into all kinds of gaieties, wherever there is a chance of getting a glimpse of Margaret—the little witch has quite turned his brain. But I really must go, I had no idea it was so late; these pleasant little chats make the time pass so quickly. Good-bye, good-bye. We

will call for Margaret in very good time."

Lady Erlescliffe dropped her hands into her lap, and sat lost in thought long after Mrs. Burke had departed. What did it all mean? Was it possible that there could be any truth in either of her surmises? The more she reflected, the stronger the possibility appeared. She remembered now that she had sometimes thought Colonel Dunstable too much absorbed in Margaret; but she had never considered it seriously. Everybody knew he was an eccentric man, less heed was taken of his doings than of other men's, and many privileges were extended to him which were denied to them; people had smiled at his devotion in that particular quarter, but no one took the trouble to wonder how it would end; they had a vague idea that it would die a natural death, and he would drop out of their charmed circle, and be lost for awhile, as it

had happened many times before. He had so long avoided the matrimonial lasso that mothers and daughters began to despair of his ever being fairly caught. That his strange, melancholy spirit should be in a manner fascinated by her lovely, blooming Margaret, was no matter of surprise to Lady Erlescliffe, but the idea that she might reciprocate his feelings never for a moment crossed her mind; she considered him quite devoid of those attractions which are commonly supposed to interest the female race, and utterly wanting in all the dash and brilliancy necessary to captivate such a bright, laughter-loving creature as Margaret, whereas the very things she scored against him, his strange, fitful moods, varied by lightning flashes of mirth, the adventurous life he was supposed to have led in that far land over the sea, whereof strange whispers had occasionally been wafted to

these shores, and the mystery with which he still chose to shroud his life, were exactly calculated to rouse and interest all that was romantic in the nature of an impulsive, warm-hearted girl far more than the stereotyped attractions of the general mass of mankind. If there really was anything serious in the matter, she thought it would be no bad thing for Margaret. She regarded marriage, as women of the world who have outlived their own youth too often do regard it, merely as a matter of convenience, there being a certain something to be gained on both sides; a joining of hands, with a naturally decorous regard; but of the joining of hearts, the union of thoughts, feelings of mutually sympathetic natures, she knew nothing. So that two lives flowed fairly together in the world's eyes, she never looked beneath to see how far and wide they flowed apart, nor thought of the seeth-

ing cauldron of human agonies that boil and bubble out of the world's sight, of the harrowing tortures which must be endured when two bodies are bound together in unbreakable bonds which the soul is for ever panting and struggling to rend asunder. She had never seen the ghastly skeleton which lies hidden in so many fair-seeming homes, and only rises up and rattles its bones when the curtain falls on the world's painted pleasures, and the melancholy domestic tragedy must be played out at the fireside, when home-joys and sweet domestic ties should be at their fullest and sweetest.

Her own griefs and sorrows had been born of the world; she had never known one that the world had not power to soothe or heal outright. She could comprehend any tangible trouble, and with a woman's tact and cleverness could unravel a tangled

skein of difficulties, and set many crooked matters straight; but of what she called "sentimental sorrows," the bitter misery of uncongenial lives bound up together, she knew nothing. The idea of any tender love creeping into Margaret's heart for Colonel Dunstable never struck her; she only entertained the mere prose fact of her marrying, never reflecting that an unloving woman is the most accursed heritage that can fall to a man. She would be quite content if she could manage to get Margaret married or engaged to such a man as Colonel Dunstable before the season was over, and would consider she had done her duty nobly and well, to the satisfaction of all parties concerned.

CHAPTER IV.

VANITY FAIR.

FASHIONABLE mothers, who had daughters to marry, regarded Cecil Slade as a decided "detrimental": those who had no fortune could not afford to indulge even in a passing flirtation with him; those who had would not let their kindly glances fall on the second son of a half insolvent widow—they cast their eyes in another direction. Some few British matrons were disposed to give him the cold shoulder, but none gave the cut direct, especially as he showed no wolfish propensity to prey upon their tender brood. People did not care

to offend him, for there was a certain caustic power in his speech that would pay back any slight offence against him. He did not care for what he called "the vulgar scrimmage" of fashionable crowds; he preferred the more genial atmosphere of the, perhaps, more exclusive literary and artistic circle, where he found the working power of the world. He loved the genial men and gentle women who thought for themselves, uttered their thoughts frankly, never fearing to give offence in their free companionship. They were not clamouring for place, and feared to offend no party; and as they were not seeking preferment, they could afford to be true.

Lady Erlescliffe thought over Mrs. Burke's insinuation respecting her son, and winced under it for more reasons than one. Mother-like, she exaggerated her son's attractions; in her proud maternal eyes he shone

with all the glory and grace of perfect manhood. That Margaret, or any other woman, should fall a willing victim to his manifold attractions, would have been no surprise to her; the most desperate attachment any foolish female heart could conceive for her son she would have accepted as a mere prose fact, a natural consequence, which would follow him on his way through the world. Others might be scorched in the furnace of love, but *he* never. She could not imagine his proud, pale, aristocratic face softening into tender love-lights, or his pulse beating to a passionate thrill even under the winning, wayward grace of her favourite Margaret. The feeling of any other woman towards her son was nothing to her; she took no heed of them; but if Margaret, who had been trusted to her guardianship, should take any foolish fancy

into her head respecting him, it would be a serious grief.

Many a mother in her situation would have schemed to gain a beautiful, wealthy, and well-dowered bride for her son; the temptation would be great, and the progress of affairs greatly facilitated by the residence of the young heiress under her roof; but this very fact, that she *was* under her roof, trusted to her care, would effectually prevent Lady Erlescliffe from advancing such a cause, even though the affections of both parties had been mutually engaged. She was poor, she was proud, but the world should never say that she schemed for her son, especially by entrapping a young girl beneath her own roof for dishonest barter, under pretence of honest guardianship.

Looking back, she could not remember an occasion when he had paid any special attention to Margaret that could encourage

the slightest feeling on her part; indeed, she had at times been vexed by his omitting those courtesies which she considered due to any guest of hers. She wished them to like each other, and had hitherto tried to encourage a certain friendly intimacy between them, but in future she resolved to avoid throwing them together, to watch Margaret more closely, and to throw cold water upon any symptom of feeling which threatened to ripen into anything more than mere conventional regard.

Mrs. Burke's visit, however, was fraught with unalloyed pleasure to one person, and that was Margaret, who rejoiced to find that, in spite of the disappointments that had met them at every turn, the opera-box had been obtained at last, and that through the agency of Colonel Dunstable. How good he was!—how much more kind and thoughtful wherever her pleasure was con-

cerned than anybody else! As soon as the good news reached her, she snatched a hasty dinner, and hurried upstairs to make her toilette, singing snatches of the dear old ballads, as she always did when she was in especially gay spirits; they seemed to bring a breezy bit of home back to her.

How she would have liked her father and all the home-folk to see her in all her lovely dresses, moving about among "the gay and festive throng." Of course they heard all about it, but hearing was not like seeing. Nelly had told her that Rob thought she was very beautiful in the old days, which somehow seemed falling so far off—but what would he think if he could see her now? She dressed on this occasion with perfect elegance and simplicity, wearing a delicate cream-coloured gauzy robe, with crimson flowers on her breast and in her hair; but no other ornament—she needed

none; her youthful bloom and natural grace invested her with attractions enough. She chose perfect simplicity on this occasion, as she knew she could not compete with the unusually splendid toilettes which would most likely grace this special occasion; she would be a striking contrast to the rest of the audience, for of course everybody would wear their most gorgeous dresses, costliest jewels, and brightest looks, eager to give all outward and visible expression of universal joy at the royal traveller's return. From the first moment he touched British ground, nay, from the moment he entered British waters, the first key-note of general rejoicing was struck. The guns boomed forth their brazen welcome, rolling with a rattling roar across the sea, and from thousands upon thousands of living hearts there rose up cheer upon cheer, till the very air shivered and shook for miles

round, and the voice of the people grew hoarse with welcoming their most popular prince. Through every stratum of society, high and low, rich and poor, there ran one tone of gladness. Through all the day his progress had been one march of triumph—an hour's rest, a glimpse of "home, sweet home," and he was to face the full glare of the world again, the world that gathered nearer and closer to him, full of familiar friends and friendly faces.

Margaret had never seen the Prince, and therefore she doubly rejoiced at the opportunity of seeing him on such an occasion. Colonel Dunstable had been fortunate enough to obtain a box which would command a view of the royal party the moment they entered. No one came to listen to the opera that evening, nobody heeded it; even the delicious tones of the fairest *prima donna* of the day would for once have fallen on

unheeding ears; a buzzing hum of expectation would have mingled with her sweetest notes; every head was turned one way, and all eyes were fixed on that one empty space. Presently there was a stir, and in another moment the royal pair, with their two young sons, stepped forward to the front of the box. With one accord the house rose, eyes sparkled, diamonds flashed, and a storm of "Hurrahs" filled the air, echoing from roof to rafter with one joyous shout of welcome, the voice of thousands uniting like the voice of one.

It is not often that the autocrats of the opera are warmed to such an outburst of feeling, but the outer crust of conventional etiquette was broken, and loud, long, and hearty was the welcome that burst from their lips; the tender nature of the woman beamed in the face of the royal wife; her lip quivered, her soft blue eyes shone through the happy tears that would not be repressed,

as she glanced proudly at her husband's bronzed face; and *he*—well, the royal pride could not mask the feelings of the natural man, his uncontrollable feelings flashed up in his face, and brightened and hallowed it. He was at home once more, among his own people; he looked as though he could have taken the whole living land in his arms and blessed and thanked it with a tear. Margaret's eyes were humid, she was excited and deeply touched by the whole scene—as, indeed, such scenes are calculated to move sterner and colder natures than hers. With more warmth and enthusiasm than she was accustomed to show to Colonel Dunstable, she laid her hand in a sympathetic way in his, and, with a glad light shining in her face, looked up in his, and said,

"This has been such a treat to me! I so longed to come, yet I despaired of coming, till you came to the rescue, as you

always do. How can I thank you enough?"

"Pshaw! child, how grateful you are for such a trifle!" he exclaimed. His hands closed over hers, and kept them close clasped while he was speaking; with bent brows, and eyes glowing with the strange light that always puzzled her, he added, rather as following the flight of his own thoughts than addressing her, "I wonder what you will be like after a year's drilling in this detestable world?"

"Poor dear world!" exclaimed Margaret. "It is the fashion to abuse it. But I always think those who call it detestable help to make it so. Ah, but I oughtn't to say that to *you*, when you have just helped to make it so pleasant to me."

He did not speak for a moment, but patted her hand softly with a dreamy gesture. Then he said, in a very low, half incoherent voice—

"I wonder, if I were hungry and asked for bread, whether you would give me a stone?"

Margaret had grown accustomed to hear him dart from one matter to another quite opposite, with no connection whatever between the two; that was one of the strange parts of his character. Sometimes when you were conversing with him, believing his attention to be earnestly engaged, he would turn round and make some *mal àpropos* observation, as he did now. This odd habit of his used to startle her at first, but now it only amused her. Sometimes she held the "mirror up to nature," and laughed at his oddities, and made him laugh at himself with an audacity which surprised herself as much as it surprised other people, for as a rule he and his quaint ways were held in profound respect. Sometimes she

answered him playfully, as in the present case.

"Give you a stone!" She echoed his words reflectively. "Well, no; if you ever do ask me for bread, you shall have it well buttered—both sides, if you ask prettily."

"Like the rest of the women, you are full of fair promises; but when the day of fulfilment comes, you are bankrupt—no effects."

He let her hand fall abruptly, and turned away, just as the curtain rose, and the next act of the opera commenced. He never turned his eyes towards her, nor spoke to her again till the curtain fell.

Like an accustomed cavalier of ladies he helped to cloak and shawl them both; then, taking Margaret on his arm, and bidding his sister "keep closer," they descended the wide staircase, and made their way through the crowded lobby to the door, hearing

more than one exclamation buzzed round as they passed through. "What a distinguished-looking man!" was whispered on one side, and "What a lovely girl!" on another.

"Margaret, love," cooed Mrs. Granville Burke in her ear, "if you've no objection, we'll walk to the carriage. If we wait for it to be brought round, we shall be penned up in this draughty lobby for the next half hour."

Margaret, of course, had no objection, and by degrees they reached the door, and followed the footman to the carriage, which stood in line some little distance up the Strand.

"Have I been very rude and abrupt to-night?" said Colonel Dunstable, in a low voice, as he held firmly the gloved hand which lay upon his arm.

"Of course you have. I should not

know you if you were anything else," she answered, with a merry smile.

"A doubtful compliment."

"I did not mean it for one; but I really should not like you so well if you were to dwindle down to mere common-place. Will that do? I don't often make such a polite speech."

"Better than the first. But you must never joke with me—never. I'm a fool, I know, but I take every word you say as though it were a gospel truth."

"Oh, please don't do that!" she exclaimed, in some alarm. "We all indulge—we *must* —in a little skirmishing between truth and falsehood now and then."

"Do that skirmishing business with other men," he whispered softly, "never with me. It will be a black day for me when I see your fair soul smirched with even the whitest of lies."

These few hurried words passed between them as they elbowed their way slowly through the moving mass which crowded the narrow pavement, passing and re-passing to and fro, a kaleidoscope of living faces, with varied feelings lighting every one—loungers, idlers, and workers gathered together *en masse.* It was the first time Margaret had ever walked, even that short distance, through the crowded London streets at that hour of the night. The lights, the people, the general hubbub, the scraps of talk she caught in passing, attracted and amused her as they wended their way along, quite unconscious that she was quite as much an object of attraction to other people as they were to her. The gauzy covering had fallen from her head, and the sweet, animated face was bared to the moonlight. There was a slight block just before they reached the carriage, when Mrs. Granville

Burke found time to whisper in her ear—

"Pull on your hood, Margaret; there's a man been dodging about and staring at you all the way."

Margaret could not pull on her hood, and she did not mind being stared at; she knew she was not being cruelly criticised; the mere staring did her no harm. She enjoyed this elbowing their way through the crowded streets, and wished their progress had been longer. Colonel Dunstable put them into the carriage, and shut the door, directing the coachman "home."

"But you come with us? I'll set you down where you like—come, get in."

"No, not now. Good night."

In another moment his tall figure was wending its way through the street as rapidly as the crowd permitted.

"Extraordinary conduct! I know he meant to sup with me. What have you

been saying to him?" she added, addressing Margaret, with a snappishness that was unusual to her.

"*I!*—nothing," replied the astonished girl.

"Ah! there he is, following Sidney!" exclaimed Mrs. Burke, suddenly leaning forward and following her brother's retreating figure with her eyes.

"There's who?" inquired Margaret.

"The man."

"What man?"

"I knew he was after no good," added Mrs. Burke, not heeding Margaret's inquiry, "and such dreadful things do happen in London. If I could only warn Sidney! Ah! they are lost in the crowd now!"

Margaret, too, leaned forward and looked eagerly round upon the moving mass of faces to see who or what had caused her companion's excited exclamation. A sudden light flashed into her eyes, a smile

played round her lips as she murmured, half to herself, half aloud, with a slight accent of disappointment,

"Why did not he speak to me?"—for in the full glare of the gaslight she caught a glimpse of the broad shoulders and bronzed face of Robert Kestrel following close on the heels of Colonel Dunstable. Perhaps Mrs. Granville Burke did not hear Margaret's soft uttered words, for she continued, in anxious tones,

"I'm sure that horrid-looking man had some designs on Sidney—did you see his face, Margaret?"

"Dear Mrs. Burke," she exclaimed, with a rippling burst of laughter, "there is no need for anxiety. Yes, I did see his face; that horrid-looking man is only Rob——"

"And, in heaven's name, who is Rob?" said Mrs. Burke, repeating the word with a strong accent of disgust.

"A very particular friend from my own home," replied Margaret—"the son of my father's managing man of business; and we've known each other all our lives," she added, as a kind of explanatory note.

"Humph!" exclaimed Mrs. Burke, pressing Margaret's hand affectionately. "Dear child! Your father did well to send you to London!"

CHAPTER V.

GENTLE BOHEMIA.

THREE days passed, and Colonel Dunstable had neither been seen nor heard of. Inquiries were made at his own home. He had not returned there, nor had he presented himself at his sister's. No one had caught a glimpse of him in the Row, though, during his stay in town, he was never known to miss his daily ride or ramble there. Mrs. Burke, who was, perhaps, the only person who had any actual interest in him, was only slightly anxious about him. She was accustomed to his strange exits and entrances upon the stage of London life, so

she raised no hue and cry about him, but made mere casual inquiries among their common friends. She was certainly surprised, and she had her own particular reasons for being so, at his absenting himself in such an eccentric fashion just at that time. It was contrary to his avowed intention. He did not often make plans, nor avow intentions; but when he did he generally carried them out.

Margaret had set her mind quite at rest concerning the suspected party who had followed him after the opera. As they sat talking the matter over in Lady Erlescliffe's morning room, the cosiest nook in the house, which only intimate associates or special friends were permitted to enter, Mrs. Burke seemed struck by a sudden idea.

"By-the-bye, Margaret—though, of course, I've no doubt that things are all right, yet I'm just a little curious—it strikes

me that we might perhaps hear something of my brother from—from that person in whom you seemed so much interested, and who certainly could tell us where he went, or when he lost sight of him."

"You mean Rob Kestrel?" said Margaret. "I don't know where to find him. Besides, it was only your fancy. I don't suppose he was following Colonel Dunstable at all. It isn't like Rob to play the spy upon anybody, especially upon Colonel Dunstable. Why should he?"

"Well, my dear, it is impossible to fathom people's motives. I only tell you he was following *us*, and looking hard at you all the way; and since you are such very good friends, I wonder he did not speak."

"To tell you the truth, so do I," replied Margaret frankly; then, addressing Lady Erlescliffe, she added, "We're talking of

Robert Kestrel—Nell's brother, you know. I've told you all about him."

Lady Erlescliffe nodded and smiled as she remarked—

"I think the young man acted with great propriety. Naturally he would not presume to claim acquaintance with you *now*."

"Why not?"

"Because—well, my dear Margaret, you must see that things are changed. When you have once shaken the dust of old days from your feet, and loosed the ties of old associations, it is not always wise to resume them."

"Pooh!" exclaimed Margaret defiantly, seeing, and quite understanding, the drift of her remark. "I should always be glad to see Rob; and I'd speak to him gladly, and shake hands with him anywhere."

"Well, my dear," replied Lady Erlescliffe complacently, "let me hope that this unde-

sirable person will not presume to press his acquaintance on you here."

"There's no fear of that. He is as proud in his way as you are in yours," said Margaret.

"Of course it would not do for *you* to stir in the matter," put in Mrs. Burke. "But I should like to know—and certainly a few inquiries could no harm. Perhaps, Margaret dear, your brother might be able——"

"A capital idea," exclaimed Margaret, seizing the unuttered suggestion eagerly. "George and Robert were always very good friends. I daresay he'll know where to find him, and will make any inquiries you like. Dear Lady Erlescliffe, you will not miss me at your family conclave to-night, I should only be in the way, and I've had a letter from father, which I want to show to George; besides, it is such a long time since

I've had a talk with him really, and there's so much I want to say—let me go; and I can take those books which have been waiting here so long for Mr. Slade to fetch away."

"But, my dear child," exclaimed Lady Erlescliffe, quite taken aback by this sudden burst of eagerness, "consider, a bachelor's lodging!"

"My own brother's!" urged Margaret.

"And my son's," rejoined the elder lady.

"He counts for nothing. I must go, dearest Lady Erlescliffe," she added coaxingly. "I've set my heart on surprising the lions in their den, and this is such a good opportunity. I'll swoop down upon them before they have time to set their house in order; it will be such fun!"

"I have not seen Cecil for some days," said Lady Erlescliffe half aloud. "If I were

not so much engaged to-day I would go with you."

"There is no necessity," replied Margaret.

"It is impossible you could go alone," rejoined Lady Erlescliffe decisively.

"Not at all," urged Margaret, resolved to carry her point. "I daresay there are plenty of ladies who do go there alone—models, for instance."

"Models!" repeated Lady Erlescliffe, with some disgust. "I'm afraid they talk to you too freely about their artistic affairs. You don't understand. It does not matter what the world thinks or says about the 'models,' but you are in a very different position."

"*Now*, yes, but suppose I became very poor, I might go out as a model myself. I should think it was a very nice easy way of getting a living—that is, if I were pretty enough." She glanced into the looking-glass, as though she had not much doubt about

that. Determined not to be driven from her point, she added, "Now I'll make a proposal. I will go, but just as a concession to propriety, since you seem to think it necessary, I'll take old Evans with me. Surely he has dull respectability enough to add weight to the lightest feather-head that ever wore petticoats."

It was some time before Lady Erlescliffe could be coaxed into giving her permission; as fast as she set up her objections, Margaret knocked them over like ninepins.

"She was quite sure," she said, "that her father never meant her to be cooped up like a lunatic, never allowed to go out except under guard."

"Young ladies of well-balanced minds, and proper ideas of decorum, never wish to go out alone."

"Well, my mind is not well balanced, and I do," persisted Margaret. "The idea

of being kept apart from my own brother, too! Look here, I hate to do anything sly or underhand, but if you put this horrible code of society in full force against me, I shall evade it, outrage it perhaps, and throw myself loose from it altogether. I will not be condemned always to walk in society's narrow ways, there is too much sham about it. It puts a black mark on the most harmless, innocent things, and allows others that *I* think mean and detestable."

The rippling stream of conventional objections was quite swallowed up in Margaret's strong-waved self-will, she carried her point, as she always did when she once set her mind upon a thing. She saw that her pertinacity vexed Lady Erlescliffe, and brought a cloud on her usually placid brow, but in her pretty, playful fashion, she caressed and coaxed her into smiles again.

A cab was called to the door, and the

elderly, grim-visaged man-servant mounted guard on the box, and, in great glee, Margaret drove away, revelling in the idea of her sudden descent into the world of art. What would they say? Would they be glad to see her, or would they be vexed with her for breaking in upon their bachelor life unexpected and uninvited?

She was not left long in doubt. The cab rattled across the park, and soon reached Newman Street, the nursery of art, where so much talent and genius lies ripening to a rich and full maturity. The world of fashion, in its migratory progress, deserted it years ago, but left a strong impression of its presence lingering behind it which will last for years to come. The large, lofty houses, both within and without, are dull enough to look at now, like the empty halls

"Whose guests are fled, and garlands dead,"

but it is easy enough to picture the life of a past generation, as it once thrilled and throbbed through these vacant chambers; the ghosts of the dead days still seem to fill with a haunting presence those old time-honoured dwellings which fall so slowly to decay—for in spite of the renovating process of painting and patching of modern art, the signs of old age will show, like the wrinkles on an old face that will not be smoothed or painted out. Yield the reins to our imagination for a moment, and we see the sedan-chairs at the open doorways, and our pig-tailed forefathers and be-hooped and powdered grandmothers in their stiff brocades and furbelows crowd up the oaken staircases, surging through the lofty chambers, filling the air with rippling laughter and current scandals, or highly-spiced witticisms of the day.

"All houses wherein men have lived and

died are haunted houses," says the poet; and truly, when we find ourselves in the homes of old days, something like the weird presence of these long-buried things seems to strike upon our hearts, though not upon our sight.

The cab stopped at one of the least gloomy of these houses. All that modern art could do to brighten and hide its ancient visage had been done; the brickwork had been newly picked out, the door had been freshly painted, grained, and decorated with a brass knocker in the shape of a lion's head holding a scroll in its mouth, with instructions to all visitors to "knock and ring."

Under the convoy of Mr. Evans, Margaret descended. He gave a thundering rat-tat at the door, which sent a cannonade of echoes rumbling through the empty street. The door was promptly opened by a wild-looking female, with a profusion of yellow

hair tumbling over her shoulders, and sparkling blue eyes, who might have done double duty as maid-of-all-work or the mad Ophelia.

"Is Mr. Siward at home?" inquired Margaret, as Mr. Evans placed himself grimly on guard beside her.

"Yes, Mr. Siward was at home." The domestic treasure jerked her head towards the staircase, and added further information. "You'll find both the gentlemen there, if you'll be kind enough to walk up to the studio—first-floor front."

The wild-looking maid dived down into the lower regions, and Margaret was left to make her way up the wide oaken staircase alone. The door of the first-floor front was effectually blocked by some heavy packages, which were piled up before it, so she turned to the other, which evidently led into the back room. She paused a mo-

ment, half hesitating as she heard the sound of a piano; some one was playing, and playing well, too. She tapped lightly at the door; a quick-striding step crossed the room, and threw it open, and her laughing eyes were uplifted to Cecil Slade's astonished face. He was in gentlemanly *déshabillé*—velvet-coated, after the artistic fashion of to-day; his rumpled hair was shaken back from his forehead, he held his palette in one hand, a stick and brush in the other. Woman-like, she took in his appearance at a glance, and a thought flashed through her mind—"How much better, how much more picturesque he looks than in his swallow-tailed evening costume!" For a second he looked beyond, to see who was following her; he could hardly believe that his mother, with her punctilious notions and conventional prejudices, had allowed her to come

by herself. She read his wonder in his eyes, nodded, smiled, and said,

"Yes, I'm all alone—won't you say you're glad to see me?"

There was no need to say it. Down went the palette and brush on the nearest object, and out went both his hands to close on hers, and draw her into the room. The music continued. She glanced round. It was not there. Mr. Slade laid a finger on his lips, and led her through a middle door into the next room. On one side of the fireplace, with his back towards them, sat George at the piano—for he was the mysterious performer. He had neither heard the door shut, nor caught Margaret's low-spoken words, so continued playing. Lightly, on tip-toe, she went behind him, laid her hand over his eyes, pulled back his head, and kissed him.

"Guess who it is," said Slade, in a burst of laughter.

"Why, Madge, of course. Who else would take a fellow unawares, and kiss him like that?"

In a careless, brotherly fashion he returned her embrace, with a masculine peck on the cheek, and asked her a dozen questions in a breath. "What did she want? Why had she stolen a march on them like that? Was there any good news from home?—or bad?" &c.

Meanwhile, Mr. Slade cleared a chair for her to sit upon, and cut short her brother's inquiries.

"Stop questioning, George. We don't ask the sunshine why it comes to us—we are only too glad to get it. Though, if we had expected your visit," he added, turning to her, "we would have set our house in order."

"Exactly what I did not want you to do," she answered. "I wanted to see you in your everyday life—and a very nice, pleasant life it seems to be," she added, glancing approvingly round.

"There is no particular reason why we should be miserable," answered Mr. Slade. "George and I are philosophic enough to make the best of most things."

"The 'best' seems ready made," she rejoined, glancing round with scrutinizing eyes, like a curious magpie. "How nice and comfortable you seem!—I was going to say how jolly, but all the old expressive slang has been drilled out of me. You've got everything—sofas, chairs, piano—carpet too! How luxurious! I'm quite disappointed. I expected to find bare boards, wooden seats, and—and everything rough and untidy."

"Well," said Mr. Slade, glancing round

reflectively, "I think we're untidy enough to satisfy most ladies; and as for roughness, most men use the studio for work only. But this is our home, remember."

"And an uncommonly jolly place it is," broke in George, slapping Slade on the shoulder. "He's such a capital fellow. He's got the knack of putting everything the right side outwards. He can cook a chop and dress a salad fit for a king."

"Pray don't enumerate my culinary talents, or your sister may want to put them to the test," rejoined Mr. Slade, laughing, seeing that Margaret was making a special survey of the room, and glancing curiously round a large Japanese screen, which was drawn across one side of the room. His eyes followed hers as he added—

"I see you will not be happy till you have penerated into all our nooks and corners. Well,"—he drew the screen aside—

"this is our glory hole. Like most of our neighbours, we keep our skeletons out of sight.

So encouraged she penetrated "the glory hole," which was filled with odd, quaint things, thrown together into a heterogeneous mass of confusion. A number of plaster casts were hung against the walls, interspersed with some very fine specimens of old armour in different stages of dilapidation. In one corner were some rare bits of old carving, and an old oak cabinet, black with age, rather rickety on its legs and loose in its hinges; but the design was exquisite, the workmanship perfect; every curving outline and leaf bore the signs of a master-hand, and all so fresh and crisp it might have been carved but yesterday. Then there was a broken boat, with the limp figure of a woman drooping over the side. Close by, as though keeping guard

over her, stood a life-sized lay-figure. It was not in requisition for active service now, and stood in an impossible position, its toes turned in, its knees turned out, and its jointed limbs twisted all awry. A dilapidated hat was jauntily stuck on its head, and a tattered cloak was thrown over one shoulder.

Margaret kept up a running fire of piquant observation upon whatever attracted her attention, wringing a little harmless joke out of everything she saw, and was especially facetious on the subject of the precious lay-figure and its surroundings.

"Ay, you may laugh, young lady," said Mr. Slade, with the affected gravity of injured feelings. "These are the mere rough materials out of which I shall evolve a picturesque villain, a bishop, or a gay cavalier."

"And pray what will you evolve out of

this?" she exclaimed, rising on tip-toe, and flicking down from the head of the battered warrior a specimen of ancient millinery in the shape of a sun-bonnet, decorated with a wreath of artificial flowers, and ends of faded ribbon, in a grimy and crumpled state. "It ought to go to the wash."

"Horrible thought!" exclaimed Mr. Slade, hastening to rescue his property from her irreverent hands. "That relic of our grandmother's days is worth a fortune to me. Evidently you have no feeling for art. I believe you'd send the Venus de' Medici herself to the wash, and put her in modern petticoats, or pull-backs, I think you call them."

Then George put the bonnet on his own head, held a pipe in his mouth, and offered to sit for Aunt Sally on the spot. There was a good deal of laughter, though there was not much wit among them. Margaret,

who had not felt so light-hearted and merry for a long time, ransacked the glory-hole to her heart's content, asking many direct questions, and receiving crooked answers. The screen was drawn back to its place, and they returned to the front studio, where she sat down and gazed admiringly round her, taking mental notes of everything.

Half the studios in London, as Mr. Slade remarked, are used as studios only—this was a home as well. The floor was covered with a carpet of Morrisonian colour and design, the windows were draped to match; on one side of the fireplace stood the piano, covered with loose sheets of music, which had been pulled out of the whatnot close by; on the other side was a writing-table, bearing circumstantial evidence of somebody's scribbling propensities in sundry sheets of foolscap scrawled and scratched about; papers, pamphlets, magazines lay

scattered upon it, together with a half-filled pipe, fusees, and a Turkish smoking-cap, very unlike anything a Turk ever wore. A flute lay on a fancy cane table close by. On every side there were signs of the masculine occupants; some dress-boots and embroidered slippers had been kicked into a corner, the coal-scuttle had its mouth wide open, and a brush and duster overflowed from it. Some pictures of many sizes stood turned to the wall, as though they were ashamed of not having been sold, and dared not look their owner in the face; there were three or four easels in the room, whereon stood as many pictures in different stages of progression; on one was a very beautiful landscape, taken near Pangbourne, a cool Summer scene, with a sunshiny atmosphere, and many-tinted trees, whose luxuriant foliage made a delightfully soft umbrageous shade, with here and there the

bright June sunlight penetrating through the laden branches, and shooting rays of glory along the smooth-flowing river below. This needed only a few artistic touches to complete it. Margaret's attention was divided between this and another, a view in Warwick, taken at a different season of the year, with a view of the picturesque old castle shadowed in the distance. This, too, might be called a landscape, though of a very different description from the other, full of the rich reds, and golden Autumn-tinted trees, with their gnarled trunks covered with creeping parasitish plants growing in rank luxuriance. These were gathered drooping over a silent pool, which seemed to be hidden out of the reach of the winds or the sunlight; a weird, wild spot, with the grey skies above, and shut in with a world of variegated green.

"I like that best," said Margaret, having

contemplated both, she pointed to the Pangbourne landscape. "You seem to revel in pretty home-scenery. Did you ever go to Switzerland and paint mountain views?"

"I have been to Switzerland, but I never attempt to paint Swiss scenery. I think it is too vast, altogether too magnificent and sublime, to be adequately represented on canvas; it is too wide to be narrowed down, with its ice-crowned mountains, gorge, stream, and glacier, to six feet of canvas; no colouring could do justice to it, no perspective give an idea of its vastness—it must be seen to be appreciated, or, if not seen, had better be imagined than dwarfed down and cramped like a child's toy-village. Besides, we have so much soft, picturesque home-scenery lying in unknown, or, at least, unfrequented regions; when I have exhausted these home-subjects, perhaps I may go abroad for new."

"When I saw you first, I had no idea you were a real artist."

"Did you think I was a sham?"

"No, but I mean I thought you painted a little to please yourself, just as I do. I did not know you made it a business, and worked for money."

"Humph! it is not much money I've got at present," he answered; "but some day I hope to make it pay. Art does pay, as a rule, about one man in a thousand."

"Oh! do you know, Mr. Slade, this very morning I read in the paper about an old man, an artist, who was starved to death," said Margaret, in a subdued voice.

"I hope you are not contemplating such a fate for me," he answered, laughing. "Some men—a great many, indeed—mistake their calling, and starve for high art's sake, when they might drive a thriving trade in painting sign-boards."

"Yes, but if nobody was ambitious, and everybody was content with doing small things, who would ever attempt to do anything great? Out of a hundred failures there may be one success."

"So much the worse for the failures."

"But the one success is so much the better for the world," added Margaret.

"So you would crucify a hundred souls for the benefit of one?" said Mr. Slade.

Before she could answer him, George broke in—

"Don't get into an argument with him, Madge, or he will entangle you in such a mesh you will never be able to break through it. Though he does talk in that light way of art, he's never happy but when he is at it. We do work hard here, I can tell you. Why, sometimes we have these gas jets flaring away till two o'clock in the morning."

"*We!*" repeated Margaret—"why, what do you do? Surely you don't go halves with Mr. Slade's labours?"

"Oh! I don't attempt anything of that kind; I daresay I could, if I tried, though. I'm studying literature."

"As represented by the *Sporting Gazette*, the monthly mags, and the light three-deckers from Mudie's. Come, George, don't you pose yourself as a martyr to hard work. But we're very inhospitable; you've taken us by surprise, and sent our wits wool-gathering. Bachelors though we are, we can offer you some tea."

Recalled to herself, Margaret started up.

"Oh! but I cannot stay, and I've quite forgot to tell you what I came about; it is for Mrs. Burke—she is very anxious about her brother, and Robert Kestrel is in town, and she thinks he may know something about him."

"There's rather a confusion about the 'he's,'" said George, lazily stretching himself in his chair. "I don't know whom or what you are talking about."

"Oh, well, never mind—I only want to know about Rob."

"Rob!"

"Yes; we know he is in town, and we want to know where to find him," said Margaret—"at least, Mrs. Burke does."

"Well, I've seen him," rejoined George, "but I don't know where he hangs out. I met him in St. Martin's Lane."

"And never asked him where he lived?" said Margaret.

"I didn't want to know. Why should I?—it was no business of mine. He was always too stuck-up and independent to please me. What does that fine lady, Mrs. Burke, want of him?"

"Since you don't know where to find

him, I needn't tell you; but I must go now, I really must—Evans is waiting for me downstairs."

"Oh! smother Evans," exclaimed Mr. Slade, "I'll soon polish him off. Now you are here, we shall not let you go in a hurry," and he sauntered towards the door, when Margaret stopped him, saying,

"But Lady Erlescliffe said he was to wait to take me back; perhaps she will be vexed, and he will not like to go away without me."

"Oh! I'll make it right with the old lady," said Mr. Slade, with perfect assurance. "If blame there be, it shall lie on my devoted head; and as for Evans, if I told him to stand on his head, he'd do it!" He lounged out of the room on his errand of dismissal, and Margaret laughed at the imaginary picture of the solemn Evans standing upside down. She stood greatly

in awe of that functionary, who wore creaking boots and was never known to smile; his expressionless face looked as though it had been carved out of wood, though, indeed, that simile is an insult to the wood-carver, for how often do we see faces so exquisitely carved that the waves of feeling seem to sweep over the motionless features.

"Oh, George dear," exclaimed Margaret, putting her arms gently round her brother's neck as soon as she found herself alone with him, "what a free, happy life you must be leading here! How sorry you will be to leave it!"

"But I don't mean to leave it yet awhile," he answered, rocking lazily backwards and forwards in his chair. "We do enjoy ourselves rarely. I don't expect to leave off enjoying myself for years and years to come."

"But father means you to go home in

the Autumn; he says so in his last letter," rejoined Margaret anxiously.

"Does he? Then I don't mean to go," replied George decidedly. "Why, Madge, how do you suppose I could possibly go back and live a humdrum life at Clinton after all the fine times I've been having here? I couldn't do it! When a fellow has once tasted the wine of life, he can't go back and live on water."

"But hear what father says in his letter," said Margaret, pulling the letter from her pocket. "You know he is very determined when he once makes up his mind."

"There, don't bother me about letters," replied George impatiently, thrusting it aside. "If he has got anything to say to me, he can write and say it; if he meant me to live a money-grubbing life at Clinton, he should have kept me there. Why did he send me away?"

"That is very ungrateful!" exclaimed Margaret reproachfully. "The dear old father! he's so proud of us both, Georgey; he wants us to have advantages he never had himself. He sent you to see the world——"

"Well, and I am seeing the world, and a remarkably jolly place I find it. I haven't half done seeing it yet; when I have, I'll let him know. But, I say, Madge, you don't half know how jolly we are; I'd rather roost upon the chimney-pots here than live in a palace at Clinton. Slade is such a good fellow too—and so clever——"

"Who's so clever?" inquired Mr. Slade, as he sauntered back into the room.

"Why, you," replied George, "I've been telling her you know everything, and speak all sorts of languages—living and dead."

"Of course," interrupted Mr. Slade;

"from high Dutch to Cochin-China."

"What an expressive and elegant language that must be—judging by the way their cocks crow."

"Don't laugh at my accomplishments," said Mr. Slade gravely, "or you shall not have any tea. You have heard of every man being his own lawyer? Now I'll show you how every man may be his own cook. Come, George, light the fire; you shall see how we miserable bachelors manage to make ourselves independent of your divine sex."

By means of a little domestic conjuring, a gas-stove was dragged out of a corner, lighted, and the kettle set on to boil. George dived into the next room and fished out of some mysterious receptacle a japanese tea-tray with a harlequin set of cups and saucers, and an old china tea-pot with its cracked sides riveted together. Margaret

sat in the rocking-chair, swaying to and fro, and keeping up a running fire of saucy observations on their domestic accomplishments; they answered in the same vein with little explosive bursts of laughter as they carried on the jesting warfare. The wild-looking maid was despatched on some mysterious errand, and soon re-appeared with tempting little pats of golden butter, some delicious crisp-looking fancy rolls, and other comestibles considered necessary for the occasion. When all the rest of the paraphernalia of this social and harmless entertainment was ready, Margaret jumped up, and declared she would make the tea and toast the muffins herself. With well accustomed hands she ladled the tea into the pot, and then sat anxiously watching the kettle.

"There! it boils," exclaimed George.

"No, it only sings," rejoined Margaret, "nice tea we should have if we made it

with singing water—Why, it must boil and puff like an infant steam-engine before it is fit to pour into the pot—wait—there, now it is all right," she added, as the lid danced up and down, and a volume of steam issued from its narrow throat. Armed with a toasting-fork, she next proceeded to impale and toast the muffins, shading her face with an impromptu screen, lest the heat should catch it; but the screen was not of much use, she would keep peeping to watch the browning process. Mr. Slade, meanwhile, was making a savoury omelette, which, when done, was of a tempting golden-brown, flavoured to perfection. Margaret declared it was the most delicious thing she had ever tasted, she did not believe that Francatelli himself could have beaten that dainty.

Then they proceeded to discuss the impromptu meal with great gusto, savouring it with harmless banter and innocent fun, the

overflow of their good spirits—they hid the sugar, played conjuring tricks with the muffins, and would not even let the tea-pot rest in peace. Volleys of laughter followed their small practical jokes.

"I wonder when that stately young lady Miss Siward departed, and left this merry gipsy in her place?" speculated Mr. Slade.

"Shall I call her back?" exclaimed Margaret.

"Oh! no, we don't want her, we can spare the fair Margaret so long as she leaves us the laughing gipsy—Madge," he hesitated a moment before the word Madge fell from his lips.

"There!" she exclaimed, "you have done it once, so you must call me Madge for ever afterwards."

"Oh! I couldn't do it," exclaimed Mr. Slade, "why, what would Mrs. Grundy say? she would couple us up, label us engaged,

as they do on railway carriages, and send us by flying express on the road to matrimony."

"What a very terrible idea!" said Margaret, laughing, though he rcheeks would glow with an irrepressible blush as she spoke.

"Quite horrible," he rejoined, with an affected shudder, "altogether too dreadful to contemplate;" then he added, as though he had made a sudden discovery, "Why, George, you've finished the last muffin—did you ever read the story of the 'Greedy Boy,' and what happened to him—how awfully he was blown up with spontaneous combustion!"

They chatted and talked on in a light rambling way, giving to some subjects a humorous touch, and touching others with half playful, half pathetic gravity—they forgot how the minutes and hours were flying

—the sunlight faded from the room, and the shades of evening began to creep round them. They all knew that these pleasant moments must soon come to an end, and then their spirits gradually sank as the waves of the sea, that have been leaping and laughing all day in the face of the sun, sometimes sink down as the grey of evening closes.

"Ah! Mr. Slade," exclaimed Margaret, glancing round the cosy, home-like room, "I used to wonder why you did not go more into society; but seeing the easy, pleasant life you lead here, I only wonder you ever go into society at all."

"There's too much pharisaic snobbery on one side, and silly, under-bred pride on another to please me," he answered. "Don't suppose I'm a hermit, though; I fancy I'm rather a genial fellow; I am fond of society, but it must be of my own choosing. I hate swell assemblies, and abominate fashionable

'At homes,' when all is as smooth, as polished, and as cold as steel; the conversation, if there is any, never rises above the dead level of the day's news, every spark of originality, or sign of good fellowship, is put out, everything that is really enjoyable and genial is smothered and buried beneath a pall of dull conventionalities—it is made up of inane smiles, smart clothes, and common-place phrases—you see how heterodox I am—don't try to convert me; my poor mother gave me up years ago."

Margaret did not like to argue, or put her opinion against his; but she was enjoying society at the present time to the fullest extent, and had not a word to say against it, though she rebelled strongly against its code of conventionalities when they crossed or interfered with her personal inclinations; still she could conceive getting tired of it, and regarding it with his eyes one day; but

that day, as yet, was far off. She only said,

"But if you don't like large gatherings you surely like dinner-parties; most people do."

"Yes, when the dinner is good, and you sit next the right person—which does not often happen—a dinner-party is well enough; but when you sit between two uninteresting people, whom you have never seen before and never wish to see again, and are forced to pump up conversation and talk about nothing for three or four long mortal hours, going against collar all the way till your spirit is chafed and raw, it is a ghastly festivity; I manage to struggle through it. Some people console themselves with eating. *I* can't."

"I am afraid you are a desperate rebel against all true British institutions," she answered; "but whether you hate large gatherings or not, you'll come to-morrow

night? I know Lady Erlescliffe will be disappointed if you don't."

"Yes, I shall come, if it is only to meet the gipsy Madge again—and for nothing else," he answered.

"And you too, George," she added, turning to her brother; "you never come, and Lady Erlescliffe has been so kind in inviting you."

"Ay, yes, I know, and I'm sure I'm much obliged to her," he answered languidly; "but it requires a good deal of courage for a fellow to put himself into patent boots and white kids, perhaps to mount sentry on a door-post or stand against the wall for an hour or two blinking, like an owl in the gas-light—pooh, the game is not worth the candle."

"If everybody thought as you do, what would society come to," exclaimed Margaret, slightly indignant.

"Why, to grief," answered the irreverent youth, "and a good job too; get rid of the sham, and there would be a chance for a little real pleasure and sociability—I only wish they'd let girls into the 'Savage,' that's our club—you'd see how jolly we are there; such good fellows too, such bright, clever chaps, full of wit and good fellowship, and when Slade's in the chair we have regular roarers."

Margaret did not exactly know what he meant by "roarers," but she did not choose to expose her ignorance, but fenced off, saying in decided accents—

"Oh, I know Savage clubs are horrid places, where you smoke bad tobacco, and sing silly songs——"

"If we could only admit you as a female savage just for a night, you'd change your opinion," rejoined George.

"People who know nothing of a subject

always judge from their own ignorance, and you are no exception to the rule, Madge," exclaimed Mr. Slade, smiling. "I assure you our club is a capital school for a young fellow like George—constant association with a collection of clever, high-spirited, bright-witted young men will do him much more good than he would ever gain in what is called 'society,' if he were to tread its pleasure mill round from one year to another."

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! what is young England coming to! Naughty George! you're turning your back on society before you've well stepped over the threshold. It is your fault, Mr. Slade; I believe you have inoculated him with your heterodox notions."

While they had been talking, Margaret had been putting on her things, preparing to go; she was now hunting for her gloves, and could not find them.

"We'll take a four-wheeler, George, then you can come with us, and drop in and pay your respects to my mother," said Mr. Slade, knowing perfectly well that this proposition would be the most effectual means of scaring him off; for though George had a profound respect for Lady Erlescliffe, he preferred to show it in the distance. She was always scrupulously polite and courteously cool to him. He confided to Margaret that her presence was like a moral toothache to him. He did not respond joyfully to his friend's proposal, but said, rather hesitatingly—

"Oh, well, I don't know about that, old fellow. I've an engagement to act as vice at the 'Savage' to-night, and—I daresay you wouldn't mind taking Madge home for once?"

"I've no special objection, as you say, for *once*," he answered; and his eyes looked as

though he would have had no objection to taking her for "always." "What means of locomotion shall we take?" he added, addressing her—"a hansom?"

"That will be delightful," she answered. "I shall like it above all things. But, oh, dear, I'm so sorry this pleasant time is over!"

Her regret sounded especially pleasant to Cecil Slade's ears; from the bottom of his heart he echoed her regrets; his eyes told her so, though his tongue was silent. A cab was soon at the door, and they started homeward. To her that going home was like going from a land of light to a land of darkness.

It was a glorious night. The moon was at the full, but they did not realize its full splendour till they had passed through Oxford Street, which was, as usual, so ablaze

with gas that the soft moonlight could scarcely make itself seen, except here and there where it crept among the shadows on the roadway. As they reached Hyde Park the beauty of the moonlight in its sweet mystery was fully revealed. It glided over the tall, dark tree-tops, and lay in its pale loveliness along the shadowy grass.

Cecil Slade had taken the little ungloved hand as he put her into the cab, and somehow had forgotten to let it go, so it lay passively in his as the cab rattled along. Neither spoke; they went on without exchanging a word. More than once their eyes met in long, sweet lingering looks. Her heart beat, and sent the blood dancing through her veins. She thought—yet it could scarcely be called thinking—rather she felt how delightful it was to be whirling through the air with him at her side—they

two, quite silent and alone, though the world of men and women were surging round them. A sweet, soothing sense of peace and rest came over her. She felt almost impossibly happy—as though it were a dream. Some sympathetic, harmonious cord seemed to be drawing their two souls together in the silence of that moonlight night.

"How lovely it is," she murmured presently, almost under her breath; but, low-uttered as her words were, his quick ear caught them. "I should like to get out. Do you think it would be any harm if we were to walk across the park?"

"Harm!" he repeated, looking down upon the sweet, innocent face, "Not the least in the world. We shall get scolded as it is, a little more or less will not do us any harm." They got out, dismissed the cab, and entered the park. "My mother is never very hard

upon you," he added, "and you will not mind a little scolding."

"I shouldn't mind being scolded for a fortnight," she answered heartily. "I have had such a pleasant—pleasant day, it is well worth it. Do you know," she added earnestly, "it has been like a rest to me. Sometimes I *do* feel a little tired and languid, though I don't like to say so. I fancy the late hours and constant excitement may be too much for me, though other people bear the fatigues of the season well enough."

"Some people have only got bodies; you have a soul, and that feels the wear and tear of the world most. Commonplace, every-day humanity is good enough for society's every-day work. *You* are cast in too fine a mould to stand it. Yet you seem to enjoy the world you live in," he added, glancing curiously in her face.

"You have everything you want, for which most foolish women's hearts are craving—gaiety, pleasure, flattery——"

"Pooh!" she exclaimed, interrupting him. "I don't believe any ever do have all they want—do you?"

"Well, no," he answered deliberately. "Generally when I want a thing I have to teach myself to do without it, and in the end I don't care."

"You take things so coolly; but if you longed for a thing very much you would care," she rejoined. "Do you think you shall be able always to go on 'not caring'?"

"I hope so,'" he answered. "What is the use of hankering after dainty cakes when you've got to live on black bread? I have never been one of fortune's favourites. She (I believe fortune is feminine, it or she is so changeable) has knocked me about,

and kneaded me with her knuckles, till I am as tough as leather, and I thought I had lost the power of longing or caring for anything; but I fancy I may begin to long and care again." For a second his voice softened to a dangerous softness, and he drew her hand closer and more securely within his arm; then he added quickly, as though pulling himself out of the sentimental slough into which he was fast falling, "But you girls have such an easy life, you don't know how we men have to rough it."

"I shouldn't think there was much roughing it in your life either, judging by what I've seen of it," she answered, smiling at the remembrance of their cosy bachelor home. He made some light passing retort, and they walked on in silence for a few moments, when he said, as though following the flight of his thoughts in another direction,

"My mother knew of your visit to us?"

"Of course. It is not likely I should have come without her knowledge."

"Of course it is not likely," he added quickly. "And those inquiries you were making? I did not pay much attention. Something relating to Colonel Dunstable, were they not?"

She told him of their going to the Opera, and of his never having been seen since.

"Humph! he's a queer fellow. But you're very much interested in Colonel Dunstable, eh, Madge?"

"Yes, I am; he is so kind to me," she added frankly. "There is something in his character, in his manners altogether, which makes me curious; he looks, and sometimes speaks to me so strangely, he quite startles me. He is like a puzzle; I want to pull him to pieces."

"And then put him together again—a dangerous pastime that," said Mr. Slade. "Look here, Madge, I know you will take what I am going to say in good part."

"I'll try to do so," she answered, wondering what he could have to say that needed apology or excuse.

"I will not quote the hackneyed saying about 'lookers-on seeing more than players,' but I really do hear rumours floating about concerning you and—Colonel Dunstable." Her face was turned away, he could not see it. "If they are true," he added, and seeing her so silent, he half believed they were, he drew a deep breath—"Well, I have no right to meddle, but I entreat you to hesitate before you attach yourself to a man of whom the world knows so little, and suspects so much."

"What right has anyone to couple my name with his?" exclaimed Margaret angri-

ly; "and why do you give me such a serious warning about—nothing?"

"Since there is nothing, then my warning can do no harm," he began, but she interrupted him before he could say any more.

"And if there was anything, do you think it would do any good?" There was a tinge of mischief in her voice; he could almost fancy he saw it peeping from her eyes.

"Well, no, I suppose not," he answered. "I was a fool to speak—meddlers always are; but you are so fresh-hearted, so new to the world, I was afraid you might be getting entangled unawares." They walked on in silence for a few minutes, when he added, in that low sweet tone that always reached down through her ears to her heart, and stirred it to a strange tremor—"And, do you know, I think I should care very much

thought you cared for him."

"But do you?" she exclaimed, emphasizing the words with all the power she had; she stopped suddenly, and looked in his face with the moonlight shining on her pure, true eyes; her cheeks were flushed, and her lips grew tremulous. He, too, stopped simultaneously, took her two hands, and held them close clasped in his; he stood in shadow; she could not see his face, but she felt his eyes were regarding her intently.

"No!" he exclaimed, and the single monosyllable had a great significance; then he closed his lips tightly, as though there were other words struggling to come forth, and he resolved to keep them back.

They had reached the park gates, and on crossing the road, found the carriage at the door waiting for Lady Erlescliffe; in another moment, and after exchanging a few whis-

pered regretful words, they entered, and to Margaret's feeling they left the world behind them.

CHAPTER VI.

"WHAT WOULD THE WORLD SAY?"

THERE was an ominous cloud upon the lady's brow, which deepened instead of dispersing when she saw how Margaret was accompanied.

"Please to look at the clock—do you see what time it is?—and you have been out since three o'clock. I really am astonished at your behaviour!" she exclaimed, before either of the delinquents had time to utter a word; but before she could get any farther with whatever she had to say, her son had stepped quickly to her side, put his

arms round her, and stopped her mouth with a kiss.

"My dearest mother, I thought you had left off being astonished at anything. As for Miss Siward's" (he was going to say Madge, but caught himself in time) "behaviour, her brother and I are accountable for that."

"She should have returned with Evans, as I desired; he would have been the proper escort for her," rejoined his mother severely.

"Opinions differ, I thought I was rather the best escort of the two—and without much vanity, I think she will acknowledge I was the most pleasant," he looked at Margaret, smiling as he spoke.

"Oh! certainly," she said, with an answering smile. "I found your society more agreeable than old Evans—he marches me along so solemnly, I feel as though I had

moral handcuffs on and ought to have chains clanking at my heels—and, dear Lady Erlescliffe," she added, going up to her in her most caressing way, "you have no idea what a pleasant day I've had—it is no use scolding me, because I shall never be sorry that I went. They were so kind, and showed me all their things, and the time passed so quickly; they lit a fire, and I made the tea and toasted the muffins myself!"

"Very pleasant pastime for the nursery, my dear, but by no means becoming in a young lady of your position," observed Lady Erlescliffe. "Suppose, mind I only say suppose, anyone had chanced to drop in and found you making yourself so thoroughly at home in bachelors' quarters! What would you have done?"

She paused, that Margaret might have time to realise the horrors of that possible position; but she was hardened, and did

not seem to realise it at all. She only laughed, and said,

"Well, I'd have toasted another muffin and offered 'anyone' a cup of tea," that course of action seeming to her the most practical and most sensible under the circumstances.

"But, Margaret, do consider the impropriety of such doings!"

"Mother mine, don't set up that bugbear propriety; it may scare the stereotyped young ladyhood who walk in the world's narrow ways and sit square in its silly old eyes, but make faces and play wild pranks behind its back; but it will have no effect on Margaret."

"I am afraid you are right, Cecil, though your opinion is certainly no compliment to her; rather the reverse," said Lady Erlescliffe.

"Pooh! she understands what I mean;

she is too right-minded and pure-hearted to need such a flimsy scarecrow," he answered. "People who are frank and open in their dealings, need not pick their way so cautiously, as some folk who are on another tack. Those who are apt to stumble in their morals, must keep a strong guard over their conduct. This wild little escapade is more our fault than hers; we would not let her go, and I chose to escort her home." He spoke authoritatively, as though there was an end of the matter and no more need be said about it.

"And we came in a hansom as far as the park, and then walked home," exclaimed Margaret, dimpling with smiles.

"That accounts for your hair being so blown about, and—— Where are your gloves?" she asked, noticing the ungloved hands for the first time.

"I've lost them," Margaret answered,

blushing, more ashamed at having come home without gloves than of anything else.

"My dear Cecil, you will create a mutiny in the domestic camp," exclaimed Lady Erlescliffe, "riding in hansoms and wandering through the park at this hour of the evening! You ought not to have encouraged Margaret to do it; if *she* does not know any better, *your* knowledge of the world——"

"Is of no use to me, mother dear," he said, interrupting her quickly, "I outrage it every day of my life. How could I be such a humbug as to teach her the way I don't want her to go! Let her be her own natural self, and indulge in her playful caracoles a little longer; society will soon put on the curb and snaffle, and make her amble and trot in its own false, hollow ways. Now, shall I hand you to the carriage? I see you are waiting to be off; but mind, not

another word to Margaret! Come, kiss and be friends before you part."

In a second Margaret's arms were thrown round Lady Erlescliffe's neck, who responded warmly to her caress, patted her cheek, called her "naughty child," and in her heart blamed herself for sanctioning the merest peep into the lion's den more than she blamed the girl for enjoying it. Having learnt that, so far as Mrs. Burke was concerned, Margaret's errand had been a fruitless one, Lady Erlescliffe departed. Margaret was left alone; still in a very dream of delight she sat down to write a letter home, giving a full true and particular account of the day's doings.

Some few uneventful days followed, unmarked by any special or interesting occurrence—the routine of life went on as usual—one portion of the day being set apart for riding or driving, then followed the

kettledrum, after that a dinner-party, an evening reception, or perhaps a dance, if dancing it can be called, when the dancers have to struggle to secure a dozen feet of ground for their set of lancers or quadrilles, and to keep up a perpetual warfare to retain it—or when a pair of waltzers may be seen here and there, turning as on a pivot to the slow German waltz, or whirling madly round in the *deux temps;* while some of the less venturesome watch and wait for their regular spin till the living cloud clears off towards the early hours of the morning.

Margaret began to feel that there certainly was a sameness in the way society amused itself during the season (this feeling might have arisen from Mr. Slade's prompting); the gaieties began to pall upon her, though at one time she had thought her delight in them would last for ever, that she could never, never weary of them. So-

ciety had received her with open arms, caressed and flattered her; she was acknowledged a beauty and a belle, everyone was predicting that she would make a great match, though no one could fix on one particular person; she was the centre of attraction to many wandering stars, who revolved round her with a certain degree of regularity; but she showed no preference, her smiles like the sunlight fell on all alike. At one time general suspicion was directed to Cecil Slade, but that was speedily hushed, as he was never seen by her side, and indeed appeared to have dropped out of the circle altogether; then a collection of British matrons collected round a kettledrum, and after debating the question long and seriously, decided that Colonel Dunstable stood first favourite; they, in their sapient wisdom, had scarcely arrived at this decision, when he suddenly disappeared! and society buzzed

and whispered its amazement through all the labyrinthian ways of wonderment, and was a long time making up its mind, and at last decided that he had proposed, been rejected, and gone back to his old haunts in despair.

Meanwhile Lady Erlescliffe was really getting anxious to make some definite arrangement for her young ward's future, which, she felt, to a great extent had been entrusted to her. She had set herself to watch Margaret closely, but could come to no satisfactory conclusion respecting her feelings; indeed, she could not understand her in the least degree although living in the intimacy of daily life with her, and having every opportunity such close intimacy affords to observe the bent of her inclinations; even she could not discover whether or not Margaret had any preference of one man or another. She had entered into the game of flirtation with the natural quickness

of her sex when hearts or diamonds are the stakes; the diamonds, when she was on the winning side, she threw by without a thought; but if a living human heart learned to throb beneath her smiles, and became warm and earnest in its devotion, she laid it gently aside, with so much soft regret, and tender sympathetic words, that its owner not only freely forgave her, but held her closer and dearer in his memory. If any of her dear familiar friends had dared to brand her with the name of "coquette" or "flirt" in the hearing of any one of her numerous admirers, one and all would have stood up in her defence, and declared that she was none. She had the unconscious art of transforming her rejected lovers into earnest and devoted friends.

Lady Erlescliffe seized an opportunity to sound her inclinations as they sat talking together one morning.

"My dear Margaret," she said, "you really should be cautious. I am sure that young Douglas is on the verge of a proposal; if you don't mean to accept him, you should not give him so much encouragement."

"Much encouragement!" echoed Margaret, with open-eyed wonder, "I only give him the *merest* bit in the world, he encourages himself. He is so silly and conceited; if I did not play with his vanity somebody else would, and—he amuses me."

"I am not going to lecture you on the folly of being 'amused' by the attentions of a man you despise, but I really should like to know if you have any special preference for any one of these gentlemen, who certainly have a preference for you." No answer came from Margaret's lips, though a slight smile played round her mouth as she sat with her hands folded in her lap, looking out upon the Green Park, illuminated

now by the bright morning suushine. Lady Erlescliffe added, "I must say you are by no means discriminating; those flowers, which came last night, were sent by young Graham, and he is as poor as a church mouse——"

"And as good as gold, poor fellow!" said Margaret, interrupting her quickly. "I accept his flowers because he would be hurt if I refused them, and for no other reason."

"Well, there is Mr. Egerton, a clergyman and a gentleman——"

"He's so sleek and fat—he overfeeds his body and starves his soul—I should run away from him in a week."

"Surely you can have no objection to Sir Edward Percy?" continued Lady Erlescliffe, getting perfectly bewildered, "he is of a good family, is in a good position, and is, besides, a most attractive man."

"Therefore, I would never give him a

chance of making my life miserable; besides I hate attractive men."

"Then, do you never intend to marry at all?" inquired Lady Erlescliffe impatiently, feeling herself foiled on all points.

"I never said that," replied Margaret, "I daresay I shall marry some day—most people do."

"Then I must say it is a most unjustifiable thing for a girl to encourage false hopes, as I know you do," said Lady Erlescliffe, more severely than she was in the habit of speaking to Margaret. "I am sorry for Sir Edward, for you have been playing fast and loose with him in the most patent manner; and he would have been a most satisfactory *parti* in all respects."

"Except one," rejoined Margaret, "that I don't care a rush about him, and I suppose a girl's feelings have something to do with her marrying. I know how things are man-

aged in the London world, and—I don't choose to be put up at auction and knocked down to the highest bidder."

"Would you be knocked down to the lowest?"

"Yes, for I should fall easier," said Margaret, smiling.

"Well, my dear," said Lady Erlescliffe resignedly, "of course you must do as you like; I have no wish to force your inclinations, but feeling as you do you have no business to play with a man's heart."

"Pooh!" exclaimed Margaret, "a girl is often accused of playing with a man's heart when she is shrewd enough to know he has not got one—only a poor leathery imitation. And as for Sir Edward—I know you are alluding to him—if he has got a heart at all, it is as small and withered as a parched pea. If you could listen at his ribs you would hear it rattle instead of beat. Depend upon

it, men, as a rule, can take very good care of themselves. It is only we poor girls who suffer when sentimental wounds are scattered abroad; and all the while we must sit like 'patience on a monument smiling at grief.' They have a privilege which we have not—they can throw the handkerchief, and try to win the love of any one of us they choose."

"And you certainly have the power to accept or reject them."

"Yes, we have the power to reject what we don't want, but we have not the power to seek what we most desire to have; we must sit down patiently with folded hands, and wait till we are chosen, looking all the while as though we did not care what 'knight came riding by,' though our hearts are beating longingly for the sight of *one*. Fancy a nineteenth century girl following in the poetical Elaine's footsteps, and telling a

man she loved him! Why, she would be flogged with scorpions, and, instead of being immortalized in tender verse, would be scouted in tolerably plain prose. Oh, dear!" she added, with a sigh, "if I could only be born again in this world, I'd pray to be born a man."

She paused a moment, and the expression of horror that elongated Lady Erlescliffe's face struck her as being so comical that she burst into a fit of laughter, more genuine and hearty than she had indulged in for many a day.

"My dear Margaret," exclaimed Lady Erlescliffe, in a tone of irritable reproach, "I am quite shocked! Just as I fancy I have brought you to a decorous state of mind, and expect you to talk like a sensible girl, you dash off at a tangent, and utter the most ridiculous and degrading nonsense. I never heard a girl talk as you do!"

"I don't suppose you ever did; but a great many girls think as I do, for all that," rejoined Margaret, quite ready to go on with the battle; but Lady Erlescliffe threw down the weapons, saying—

"Well, I think you have talked enough nonsense for one day. Run along and dress quickly. I have promised to be at Mr. Wycombe's gallery at three o'clock, and it only wants a quarter now. And ah! my dear child, do not run upstairs in that vulgar school-girl fashion," she added, as Margaret proceeded up the stairs, taking two at a time, as she frequently did when her spirits were at the highest, as they were now—she did not know why; there was no particular reason for any special exuberance on her part; there had been no outward occurrence to set the waves of her mind in happy motion. She felt blithe and happy as the birds when they soar upwards,

singing in the sunlight, and for as little reason, except that the sun was shining. It seemed to send some whispering message to her spirit's ear, which set her whole soul vibrating, as though some hidden chord had been touched by an invisible hand, and all her inner nature was quivering expectantly, waiting for some new thing to rise up and fill the vacant canvas of her daily life, which, though occupied every hour in the business of this world's Vanity Fair, seemed somehow empty and bare.

CHAPTER VII.

AN AWKWARD MEETING.

ON arriving at Mr. Wycombe's gallery, they found it filled with a host of fashionable visitors, many of whom were mutual friends and acquaintances, who had dropped in to wile away an hour in the inspection of the celebrated sculptor's works. Many of these were in a state of progression, and there were some huge blocks where the beautiful form lay imprisoned, till the sculptor's genius set it free for the world's eyes to look upon. More than one rare masterpiece, however, had received the finishing touch. These were to be despatched to

their destination on the morrow; and this being the only day they were on view, a stream of people was flowing in and out the whole day long. Few, indeed, were able to comprehend the beauty of the chiselled marble; some went because they had nothing else to do; some made it a kind of rendezvous to meet their friends and acquaintances; others, who did not possess an extensive fund of small talk, went because their visit would give them something to talk about; they dived into the world of art in the daytime to fish up ideas for the evening's conversation, when they could give a few hashed-up notions of the eminent sculptor's work, garnished with their own adulterated ideas upon the subject. If art were only patronized by those who appreciated and comprehended its beauties, it would soon perish from the face of the earth.

Neither Margaret nor Lady Erlescliffe really cared much about sculpture, and having exchanged courtesies with Mr. Wycombe, they sauntered through the gallery, made the usual vapid, complimentary speeches, and entered into a light passing conversation with such of their acquaintances as happened to be passing by at the moment. Presently Mrs. Burke's clear, ringing voice was heard discussing the merits of a classical group of Art, Science, and Music, which was to be placed in the Town Hall of Manchester, one of the most cultivated of all our manufacturing towns. As soon as she caught sight of Lady Erlescliffe and Margaret, she crossed the room and joined them, overflowing with pleasure at "this very unexpected meeting." After the usual commonplace greetings, which are uttered over and over again between people who meet every day of their lives, she lowered her voice to

a mysterious whisper, that she had heard from her brother, who was in Paris, and would remain there for a few days longer, and then return.

"Strange, isn't it, my dear," she added, "that he should run off to Paris so suddenly, and for no earthly reason that *I* know of? So ridiculously eccentric!"

"He claims the right of free action, and will not take society into his confidence. For my part, I like him all the better for his eccentricities," said Margaret, smiling. "One gets horribly tired of every-day, common-place people."

They sauntered to the end of the gallery, occasionally exchanging a few words with Mr. Wycombe, who divided his attention as evenly as possible among his visitors. The act of being showman to one's own wares is by no means a pleasant part to play. His

eyes twinkled with a sort of humour that was half contempt, though his lips smiled gravely, as he accepted courteously all the silly, flattering things which were uttered on one side, and the patronizing impertinence of others, who set up for critics on the smallest possible pretensions, and revealed their ignorance with every word they spoke.

Thus attended by their courteous host, whose patience must have been sorely tried, they reached the end of the room, and were turning languidly to retrace their steps, when Margaret stopped at a low-arched door of quaintly-carved oak; she gave it a push, and it yielded slightly to her touch, and opened just wide enough for her to peep curiously in.

"Ah, well! I declare here is a subterranean passage. I always thought those old Chelsea houses were 'things of many mys-

teries.' May we go in?" Margaret added, with an eager glance on Mr. Wycombe's face.

"Certainly, but I do not think you will find anything to satisfy your curiosity there; it only leads to my workshop, where you will find some of my pupils and other working folk preparing for the hammer and chisel."

Without more ado, Margaret, followed by the rest of the visitors, went down half-a-dozen steps, through a narrow passage, and in another moment found herself within the sacred precincts where the mystery of the sculptor's art was carried on from the mere block to the most lovely and perfect form of beauty.

"How cold it is!" exclaimed Margaret, as she drew her mantle close round her, so did all the rest of the party, for the atmosphere of the room, even on that bright

sunny day, was damp and cold, in consequence of the damp clay and stone and marble which filled it.

The hive of busy bees was in full working order; there was perfect silence, so far as voices were concerned, but the sharp tap-tapping of the various hammers, and the click of the chisel, rang out with a clear cutting sound upon the ear. One or two of the more advanced pupils seemed especially intent upon their work, measuring and marking, with compressed lips, as with deft light fingers they used their delicate implements, well knowing that, if they were driven the hundredth part of an inch awry, the whole block would be rendered useless for their master's hand. Some were working rather carelessly, as it seemed, with rough materials, but no doubt they knew what they were about. There were numerous, and among them some very large,

plinths of marble, but all in the very earliest stages of progression, some having a very grotesque, one-sided appearance, and Margaret could not help wondering who or what they were likely to turn out; for imprisoned within those unsightly blocks of marble were many forms of grace and beauty, waiting for the master's hand to come, like the magician of old, and set them free.

Certainly, as Mr. Wycombe had said, there was not much to gratify anybody's curiosity; still everybody was glad to be admitted behind the scenes, to see a little of that working life of which, as a rule, they only saw the results. Margaret, being naturally inquisitive, asked questions about everything—what was the use of this? and why the necessity of that? She was really interested in all she saw. This busy scene of labouring, thoughtful men, all patiently

working their way through the mask of marble, was far more attractive to her than the statuesque, still life they had left behind them. She picked her way daintily over the dusty floor to the far end of the room, where some less skilled workmen were busy modelling in clay, preparing work for the more advanced hands. On one side, with his back turned to the intruding visitors, was a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, with a coarse apron tied round his waist, and a paper cap upon his head, and a mass of crisp chestnut curls lying close round the back of his neck. Margaret peeped round into his face as she passed.

"Why, it's *you*, Rob!" she exclaimed, a flash of pleased surprise lighting up her face, and as she spoke her daintily-gloved hand was stretched out to greet him. He paused a moment, and then wiped his own on the corner of his apron, before he ven-

tured to touch it. Something of mingled pride, humiliation, and pleasure glowed in his face, as he mutely and respectfully acknowledged her greeting, but uttered not a word. He was annoyed at this sudden, unexpected meeting, more vexed, perhaps, for her sake, that she had recognised him; but if she had passed him by, he would have known a greater vexation still. He would have felt then that her warm heart and generous spirit were chilled and clouded by much mingling with the world's vanities; but now she stood there like her natural self, the old tones of her voice rang upon his ear, as they had rung out—the solemn joy-bells of his life—long, long years ago, and the old pleasant smile lighted up her face with youth's rosy sunshine.

Yes, she was glad to see him, glad to catch a link of the old life amid the splendours of the new. She was unspoilt

by the flattery and adulation that follow ever in the steps of youth and beauty; she was the same sweet Margaret, with the fragrance of the old days still fresh upon her. She was not ashamed to speak to him, to shake hands with him, and call him "Rob," just as she used to do when he held her up to catch at the apple blossoms in her father's orchard. She was unchanged, except as the bud changes to the full-blown flower, that was all. As her few brief words—"Why, it's you, Rob!" rang out clear as the notes of a trumpet, there was a sound like the rushing of waters in his ear; he saw her with his mind's eye rather than his actual vision, and he knew that among the fine folks round her, some were tittering with scornful smiles upon their faces, others were looking with surprise and lofty contempt at the idea of one of *them* stooping to shake hands with a man in a paper cap,

engaged as a common workman in his daily labour! Margaret, being perfectly unconscious that she was the cause of general dismay, and oblivious of the thunder-cloud that was gathering on Lady Erlescliffe's brow, went on quite innocently, "And to think of our finding you here! We knew you had come to London, and have been wondering where you had hidden yourself. Dear Lady Erlescliffe, it is Robert Kestrel, that I've told you about so often."

Lady Erlescliffe was too smoothly polished and well-bred to exhibit any annoyance, or to give any outward sign of her displeasure while the eyes of the world were upon her; but the momentary expression of her face, which she could not control, told more than any words thereafter spoken could conceal.

However, she forced a sort of galvanised smile to her lips, and said, with as much

cool courtesy as her voice could command,

"Oh! yes, I remember, one of your father's *protegés*. I know the kindly interest he takes in the working classes, though it generally ends in vanity and vexation of spirit."

As Lady Erlescliffe was speaking, Margaret became aware that the atmosphere was cloudy; she saw the disapproving faces round her, and suddenly there came to her a faint glimmering of the reason why. Her cheeks flushed, and an angry indignant light kindled slowly in her eyes.

"You are quite mistaken, Lady Erlescliffe. Robert is not my father's *protegé*, but an independent worker on his own account, and I wish him very great success."

"And never fear but he'll have it," exclaimed Mr. Wycombe; seeing that something was wrong, and feeling that a cool

breeze was blowing from the aristocratic quarter, he came to the rescue. "Kestrel is one of my most promising pupils, he has begun at the lowest rung of the ladder, and intends to work his way up to the top, and he'll reach it too."

Everyone who knows the value of a kind, generous word, coming at the right season from an influential person, can imagine the effect Mr. Wycombe's words produced more or less on everyone present, though only two perhaps thoroughly comprehended and appreciated his motive in speaking; Margaret felt as though she could have embraced the great sculptor on the spot, and Robert—well, something rose up into his throat, and for a second seemed as though it would choke him, for when the emotional spirit of this man was touched, it was as sensitive as that of a woman; a warm strong flood of gratitude rushed from his heart and glowed

in his face, as master and man clasped hands together.

A few kindly words, and a genial smile, had won Mr. Wycombe a friend who would cleave to him, and hold his name honoured thenceforth and for ever after. The creative power of his genius might gain for him the world's admiration and applause, but it would never have won for him a friend so firm and true. So choicest fruit often springs from simplest seed. Human nature generally lays so much of her good raw material ready to our hand, but we do not always know how to use it—sometimes we handle it roughly, and it breaks; we throw fierce, fiery words upon it, and it blazes up, burns, scorches us, and shrivels into nothing; we rub the harsh grit of the world's cold conventionalities upon its tender places, and it breaks into sore wounds, festers, and spreads, infecting all it touches; we treat it with

acid words and scornful looks, and it turns to gall and bitterness. Human nature is strange and capricious in all her moods, if we only knew how to handle her aright, what glorious qualities we might weave out of her homeliest materials! What divine heroes we might develop from her finer souls! What lifelong devotion we might win by a kindly act or timely word.

When Mr. Wycombe struck so suddenly into the stream of conversation, his first stroke changed the tide of feeling, which for the moment was setting strong against Margaret; his few words gave a different colour to the matter; her shocking behaviour in shaking hands with and claiming such a very undesirable acquaintance, was perhaps not so very bad after all, as he was acknowledgedly a pupil of the sculptor, and not a mere worker, as had been at first supposed. "Still," they whispered, "it was not *quite*

the thing for a lady to do." So mildly condoning the offence, the party slowly sauntered on. Margaret, the spirit of wilfulness seizing strong hold on her, did not choose to be moved on so quickly; she lingered behind, resolved to have her say out to Robert. She inquired after all home news, and elicited more trifling details from him than any letter could convey. She gave him her brother's address, and then scolded him for not speaking to her that night as he followed them from the Opera.

"Why did not you, Rob?" she persisted, in the old tone, which made him almost believe they were back again at Clinton.

"Because," he answered, "it would have seemed presumptuous and impertinent for me to have attempted to claim acquaintance with a daintily-dressed lady like you. I might have been handed over to the police."

Margaret made a wry face.

"Well, perhaps you might," she answered. "So it was the fine clothes that hindered you? Ah! 'fine feathers make fine birds,' Rob."

"But it isn't the finest-feathered birds that fly the highest," he answered, as an amused look crept into his face, "we've seen 'em the first to fall."

"Ah! you're thinking of our old peacock Joe! you remember that day he tried to fly? What a lop-sided ugly brute he looked! it was all very well while his beautiful tail lay trailing on the ground, or spread itself out in the sunlight. I feel rather like the peacock, sometimes, Rob; I shall moult my fine feathers some day, and like the lady-bird 'fly away home.'"

"Come, Margaret—we're waiting," exclaimed Lady Erlescliffe, summoning her from the far end of the room.

"Well, good-bye. You know where we

live? so, of course, you'll come and see me?"

"No," he answered shortly, "that sort of people wouldn't understand your showing an interest in a fellow like me; you would lower yourself in their eyes; you've done that already to-day—besides, I am not fit company for that lady's drawing-room, and I don't choose to kick my heels about in the hall like a lacquey." He turned to resume his work. Margaret flung a few last saucy words over her shoulder, and then languidly went to rejoin her chaperon and friends at the door. Mr. Wycombe politely bowed them out.

The drive home was a silent one so far as Margaret was concerned; she leaned back in her corner of the carriage without uttering a word, though she could not help smiling now and then at Mrs. Burke's ceasless chatter, though her words were

drowned by the rattling of the wheels; but that did not matter, she could hear herself talk, and as Lady Erlescliffe smiled with courteous attention, and occasionally uttered a monosyllable, she was content.

Margaret was glad to avoid a *tête-à-tête* drive home. She knew that a serious lecture was imminent, and she preferred receiving it at home, when she could take mental notes, and gather her forces to reply. It is not pleasant to be scolded while driving through the public streets, being compelled to keep up a bowing acquaintance with the world while angry censures are being dinned into your ears, and wrath is rising in your heart, and frowns gathering on your brow, killing the forced smiles upon your lips—with long domestic ears in the rumble on the alert to catch any stray phrases for the amusement of the servants' hall.

Margaret was not sorry to hear that Mrs. Burke's solitary grey was ill (it generally was when there was any fatigue duty on hand). She had borrowed a seat in one carriage to do her visiting business, and gladly availed herself of "dear Lady Erlescliffe's" offer to drive her home. Having deposited her at her own door, they drove homeward, still in silence, the cloud gathering deeper and deeper on Lady Erlescliffe's brow. She swept through the hall followed by Margaret.

"We dine at Lord Calthorpe's at eight," she said shortly. "If you can find time, I should like to have a few words with you before you dress."

"No time like the present," answered Margaret coolly. "I can hear whatever you have to say now, if you like."

She followed Lady Erlescliffe into her own little snuggery, flung off her hat, and

waited Lady Erlescliffe's pleasure. Her ladyship's habitual cool courtesy seemed to have deserted her; she was positively boiling over with the anger she found it difficult to repress, and for a second she was really too agitated to speak, or perhaps she hesitated lest she should say too much, and her hot words should set Margaret's spirits in a blaze—for on certain subjects she took fire easily. She, too, on her side, was full of indignant wrath, but obstinately determined to hold her peace till Lady Erlescliffe had spoken, resolved to give no help nor handle to anything she might have to say.

"Margaret," the lady said at last, in calm accents, though passion was evidently struggling for the mastery, "while you are under my charge, I must beg you at least to behave like a lady, however strongly your impulse may lead you the other way. When I proposed to introduce you into society, I little

thought I was undertaking so difficult a task. In spite of all my training, you commit some outrage on propriety every day of your life."

"That's only tit for tat; for what you call propriety commits many outrages upon *me*," replied Margaret.

"Being naturally ignorant of most matters of propriety, you regard its demands with jaundiced eyes; but as it has been my endeavour to raise and elevate you in the world's opinion, you cannot be surprised at my feeling disappointed at my failure. Coming fresh from the country, as you did, I hoped you would be easily moulded, and willing to adopt the usages, and act according to the codes of society."

"That is, you thought I was wax, ready to receive anything you chose to print upon me; but, you see, I take only the *best* impressions," replied Margaret, with

careless—or seeming careless—indifference.

"This flippancy, when I am speaking seriously, is both impertinent and unbecoming," rejoined Lady Erlescliffe sternly; "but, after your conduct to-day, I should be surprised at nothing——"

"You use strong language. I don't know what I have done to deserve it," replied Margaret.

"You know perfectly well that you have conducted yourself in the most ridiculous fashion, and made *yourself* a laughing-stock, and thrown discredit upon *me*—for I am answerable for your follies. You have given a nice nut for society's tender teeth to crack. I don't know what will be said of you. The idea of a lady in your position—one of our set—rushing up to a greasy mechanic (all very well in his own way, of course), and shaking hands, and *Bob*-ing and *Bill*-ing him as though he were your dearest friend!

You seem to have no proper sense of the way you set the world speculating when you claim the acquaintance of such a man. It is disgraceful. I positively blush for you."

"And if I had not claimed acquaintance, and been glad to see him as I was, I should blush for myself," replied Margaret. "But Robert Kestrel is not a greasy mechanic. You heard what Mr. Wycombe said?"

"Pooh! nobody was deceived by that. It was a mere ruse to cover your bad manners."

In spite of her air of indifference, or rather defiance, Margaret felt that she had made herself unpleasantly conspicuous in the sight of society, and felt that Lady Erlescliffe had every right to be annoyed, but she was annoyed and vexed herself, and, as is generally the case under such circumstances, she was rather inclined to take up arms in self-

defence than surrender at discretion. After a momentary pause, however, she said with her natural frankness—

"I am very sorry to have vexed you, Lady Erlescliffe, it was an awkward *contre-temps;* but what could I do? I was honestly glad to see Robert, and I could not help showing it—I am sorry if I trod on society's tender corns, though I don't think it is much hurt—and I really don't see what else I could have done."

"A thousand things; there was no necessity for you to have seen him," said Lady Erlescliffe.

"How could I possibly help it? Why, he was right before my eyes!" exclaimed Margaret.

"You should have shut them. One often finds oneself on the horns of a dilemma; but well-bred people always discover an easy and graceful way of extricating themselves."

"Yes, often a false and mean way."

"There was no necessity for you to do anything of the kind—with perfect ease and propriety you might have turned your head another way and pretended you did see your friend—Rob." It is impossible by mere words to convey any proximate idea of the disgust with which she emphasised the word "Rob."

"I am not used to pretending, and I can't do it," said Margaret, "but I daresay when I have mixed long enough in fashionable society I shall be able to act a lie and be as unblushingly mean as the most honourable member there."

"At any rate, while you are under my roof, I beg you will hold your gushing propensities for your former low-bred associates in check."

"I have shown no gushing propensities," said Margaret, with more quiet dignity than

was usual with her impetuous nature, "only an honest gladness that reminded me of home; sometimes I am sorry I ever left it. As for Robert Kestrel, he is *not* low-bred; he is a manly man, and has the true instincts of a gentleman, though he has not undergone the polishing process of one—though that is often a poor kind of veneering, which society gives to its masculine nonentities—that easily rubs off and shows the common grain beneath. Robert is true grit all through, and I will not have a word said against him."

"You speak hotly, young lady, I'm afraid you were scarcely sent away in time."

"In time!—for what?" inquired Margaret, wondering what she could mean.

"To break off the low intrigue which your father dreaded might end in a worse calamity—a low marriage," replied Lady Erlescliffe, utterly forgetting her usual pru-

dence, for the fiery steed, temper, will sometimes run away with the calmest souls. If she had reflected for a moment she would have bitten her tongue through rather than have spoken those obnoxious words, but they bubbled up and broke from her lips before she was aware.

Margaret heard them, and for a second looked puzzled as she repeated—"A low intrigue!" Then, suddenly realizing the full force and meaning of the insinuation, she added, with a burst of suppressed passion, her face aflame with anger, "How dare you bring such a vile accusation against me?"

"I did not mean it," exclaimed Lady Erlescliffe hastily, trying to efface the impression her words had created; "and I bring no accusation against you, Margaret."

"Then what do you mean by what you said? You must have had *some* meaning. You used my father's name, too!" Her

cheeks flushed, and her voice grew tremulous, betraying her hurt feelings. "You have only seen him once, and it seems impossible that he could have so lowered me —as to—to couple my name with Robert Kestrel's in—in the way you seem to insinuate."

"He meant no harm, Margaret," rejoined Lady Erlescliffe, doing her best to undo the evil, and going the wrong way about it. "Remember an only daughter is a fearful responsibility, and your father, in his anxiety for your welfare, took me slightly into his confidence, and gave me a little information about this young fellow's impertinent presumption, which you *innocently* and perhaps unconsciously encouraged. Naturally he was anxious to get you away from all danger; and in placing you under my care he gave you great advantages, which most people would know how to appreciate. I don't

mean to flatter you, Margaret, but a girl of your attractions, and with your prospects, ought to make an unexceptionally good match. Your father expects it, and I am doing my best to promote it; but you are so wilful—see how foolishly you have behaved to-day! All the world will be laughing at you to-morrow, and nothing does a girl so much harm as ridicule."

It would be difficult to paint the expression of acute pain which fell like a veil over Margaret's face while Lady Erlescliffe was speaking; a dull grey mist spread over her fair young life, and clouded the prospect that had seemed so bright and full of promise. A wave of distressful thoughts swept through her brain, and for a moment carried away all tender feelings, leaving only a keen sense of shame and humiliation, which set her heart throbbing with wounded pride. Hitherto she had entered into the gaieties

of London life with a strong zest, had laughed at its absurdities, and occasionally felt tempted to trample on common conventionalities, when they galled or fretted her inclinations. She had been gladdened by a sense of her own beauty, and revelled in the adulation she received, and the admiration she read so plainly written on men's faces; she knew, of course, that it was on the cards she should marry some day, but that had been only a vague idea, never considered as a near probability, the idea of its being made a *business* transaction, part of the programme of her visit to Lady Erlescliffe, had never once entered her head. She felt she had been treated unfairly, taken at an advantage, and, without her knowledge or consent, put up at auction in the world's great vanity fair, to be knocked down by the longest rent-roll, or handed over to the highest bidder in the way of family honours

and a penniless coronet, to be gilded by her father's hard-earned gold. "A good match!" Faugh! how she hated the words. All the instincts of a delicate nature revolted from the idea.

Her lip curled, the colour deepened on her cheeks at the idea of being "on view" in the matrimonial market. She read the masculine admiration in a different spirit now. She wondered if Cecil knew?—if Lady Erlescliffe had taken him into her confidence? If so, what must he think of her? especially if the insinuation concerning Robert Kestrel had reached his ear; and what was more likely than that mother and son should talk the matter over together? That her father should have misunderstood, mistrusted her, and taken a stranger into his confidence, and sent her away in ignorance of his false conception, grieved her spirit; but that Cecil Slade

should know it, contracted her heart with a keener pain. How must she appear in his eyes?—a girl who, in order to break off a "low intrigue" at home, had been hurled into London life, to be picked up by some more suitable *parti* there! It was thus in such harsh colours she painted her own position, and shrank from the picture. It would take an hour to utter the things she thought in a moment. Her cheek was pale and her voice still tremulous as she said, in a low, hard tone,

"I had no idea I had been sent to you as a matrimonial speculation. I am afraid I shall be an ignoble failure."

Lady Erlescliffe bitterly regretted the mistake she had made, as people generally do when they allow passion to blind their judgment. She must recover her ground, reconcile Margaret, and hush her newly awakened feelings in the best way she

could. There was no small worldliness or dull diplomacy in her code of action now; it was the simple woman's heart that spoke through her lips to Margaret, and her calm, well-bred face was full of feeling as she said, bending over her with a caressing air,

"I ought not to have spoken to you as I did; it showed a want of feeling, worse than a want of tact, and I beg your pardon, Margaret; I see I have pained you, and I would not hurt you for the world—you believe me, dear."

Margaret was quick to feel, quick to resent; but her generous spirit was equally quick to respond to the first expression of regret. Before the last words had fallen from Lady Erlescliffe, she had flung her arms round her neck, and burst into a flood of excited tears, as she said brokenly,

"Dear Lady Erlescliffe, don't say another

word about it, please. Yon had a right to be angry; I was rude and unmannerly, and I beg your pardon too; but I cannot help feeling hurt that my own father should have slandered me, and——"

"You must reconcile your thoughts to your father, Margaret, or I shall not feel you have forgiven me for my foolish blundering. You regard things from different points of view, the mere prose facts of life to you seem distorted, you read them all awry. Men are always ambitious for their children, and your father naturally wishes to see you well established in the world—every father in the land has the same desire for his daughter—you were quite lost at Clinton, and he placed you with me that you might take a wide view of society, and select and choose a position for yourself. He was compelled to trust me, and I ought

not to have betrayed his secret wishes to you."

"It is no matter," rejoined Margaret; "I will not betray you to him; but this is a very delicate matter. Lady Erlescliffe, tell me truly," and she looked searchingly in her face, "have you ever spoken to anyone, taken *any*body into your confidence about me?"

"Never, Margaret—I have never alluded to things that concern you—not even to my own son," said Lady Erlescliffe earnestly.

A weight was lifted from Margaret's heart. So that she stood fair and pure in his eyes—the wind might "blow as it listed." She had a long confidential talk with Lady Erlescliffe, and left that lady more comprehending and more charitably disposed towards the friends of her childhood, but she insisted they must be kept in the background,

out of the world's eyes, which always "look through a glass darkly."

"And now, Margaret, love," she added in conclusion, "what a time we have been talking!—look at the clock—it is nearly seven; run away and dress—bathe your face with a little eau de Cologne—you are so pale, and your eyes are swollen and red."

"I think I must trouble you to make my excuses," said Margaret; "I feel limp and unhinged. Society must eat its dinner without me. I don't suppose I shall be missed."

"But, my dear, consider—a vacant place at the dinner-table!" exclaimed Lady Erlescliffe, in whose eyes an engagement of that kind was sacred.

"There will be a few polite regrets," said Margaret, "then they will close up and fill the vacancy as easily as they fill up our places when we drop out of the world."

Lady Erlescliffe saw she was resolute, and left her in peace to the indulgence of her own reflections, which promised to be none of the pleasantest.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

MARGARET was right to refrain from going into society that night. She was in no mood to mingle with its light, variable humour; she could not have reflected back its empty smiles, or thrown her spirit upon the shallow stream of uninteresting small talk, with which society beguiles its festive hours; for the salt of wit or sweet savour of sentiment seldom attends at those gorgeous golden candlestick dinners, when the family plate chest is emptied of its treasures to decorate the sideboard and groaning tables, and ceremonious grandeur

fills the atmosphere and weighs so heavily upon the spirits of the guests that even the most buoyant have no spirits to struggle against it. Of course the conversation flows on its dreary course, and smiles occasionally break into open laughter; but the one is like a dull, sluggish stream, the mental force-pump is used to keep it going; the other is a mere ghastly pretence, for at such ceremonious gatherings good honest mirth or laughter holds no place, and only the ghost of geniality keeps there his shadowy court; nature is smothered or frowned out of countenance by that god of the period "etiquette," which society elevates and worships.

Lord Calthorpe's dinners were as pompous and heavy as his own post-prandial speeches in the House, which were seldom listened to and never read. Margaret had assisted at these mournful ceremonials more

than once, and on this occasion felt the sheer impossibility of going through the dreary programme. She was more hurt than she chose to confess to Lady Erlescliffe; her delicacy was wounded in its tenderest point, and she was disposed to brood over and irritate, rather than to soothe and heal her hurt spirit.

On ordinary occasions, if she had a leisure hour, she would sit down and write an extra despatch home, well knowing it would be gladly received. To-night she could not do that; if she had written at all, gall and bitterness would have fallen from her pen. Her fiery spirit could have poured itself out easily enough, if she had given vent to the feelings that were boiling in her breast; but her better self curbed and held them in check, so far as outward expression was concerned.

Her thoughts, like a hive of busy bees,

flew homewards, and swarmed upon her own hearthstone. It was just her father's quiet time, when, having shaken himself free from business, he came home to spend a leisure hour by his own fireside; when he allowed his mind to fall into complete undress, and they talked together of all kinds of possible or impossible things. He laughed at her girlish fancies, and she laughed at his old-fashioned notions. Whatever his humour might be, whether grave or gay, she entered into it. She sang to him, played to him, talked to him, or was sympathetically silent, according as he was disposed; and throughout all their lives this had been their sweetest and pleasantest hour. She pictured him now, alone in his utter loneliness, in the great silent room, perhaps, at that very moment thinking of *her*, yearning for her to come home to him. Her feelings veered round to the tenderest point; her heart

swelled; the tears sprang to her eyes, and, quick as her wrath had risen, it now subsided. She was angry with herself for being angry with him. After all, he had his own way of looking at things; he meant well, though his well-meaning had cut her to the soul.

Having once sent her thoughts that way, a pleasant, sun-lighted picture of the old home-life came before her; she grew home-sick, and would fain have stretched her wings and flown thitherward, and left this great whirling world of London behind her. Her mind was thrown into a state of chaotic confusion; she could settle down to nothing, but, in a state of restless agitation, paced up and down the room.

Then she drew aside the window-curtains and looked out. What a glorious night it was! There was not a cloud in the whole wide skies, and the white full moon hung

suspended in the depths of fathomless blue. She could see the lights of the carriages as they rattled along at different angles of the moonlit park, crossing and recrossing one another, as it seemed, some going one way, some another; and the tall trees, dotted here and there, stood dark and shadowy in the distance. All without looked so soft and peaceful, within it seemed so still and gloomy—she could not hear a creature stir. There was not a sound within the house—only the distant whirring of the world outside reached her ears. The monotonous stillness that reigned round her weighed upon her spirits; she grew so nervous she could hardly breathe, shut in by those four walls; she must shake herself free, and rush out to breathe the cool night air, and feel the freshening breeze blowing in her face and on her throbbing temples. If she could only send her body, as she had already

sent her soul, out into the balmy night!

"Why can't I go—why shouldn't I go out if I like? It would be no harm—not the least in the world, and it would do me so much—ah! so much good," she sighed as she let the curtain fall, and turned from the window. She almost wished she had exerted herself, and gone out, the boredom of dull society would have been preferable to this monotonous, quiet solitariness. Perhaps Lady Erlescliffe might not return till midnight; how could she pass the time till she came home! The wonder had scarcely risen in her mind when she heard the street-door open and shut—then there was a soft, quick footfall on the stairs, somebody was coming up whistling a low merry tune.

Margaret's heart seemed to leap into her throat, and sent the warm blood rushing through her veins! In another moment that somebody turned the handle of the door,

lifted aside the heavy portières, and entered the room with a free lounging air. He paused suddenly, the whistle died upon his lips, when he saw how the room was occupied; there was no sign upon his face to tell whether he was glad or sorry to find Margaret there alone; but there was no mistaking the light that illumined *her* face, and broke it into smiles, dimples, and all, when she saw who was the unexpected visitor.

"Margaret!" he exclaimed, in some surprise, "I thought you were dining at Lord Calthorpe's."

"No, I stayed at home—but I wish I had gone now, for I've been miserably dull."

"And why didn't you go?" he asked, leaning his elbow on the mantel-piece and regarding her with curious eyes.

"Because I was vexed and worried," she answered, blushing painfully beneath his gaze.

"May I guess why you were vexed and worried?" he said softly.

"No," she answered shortly, "because you would be sure to guess some silly, frivolous thing which would vex me more."

"Perhaps I should be wrong to call it guessing," he said. "The fact is I paid a visit to Wycombe's studio, and I know. I was told you had met an old friend there, and were not ashamed to own him."

She turned away her head, she could not bear his steady scrutinizing eyes upon her face; she wondered what he had heard? what he was thinking of her? She played with her bracelet, twisting it round her arm, as she said in a low tremulous voice—

"Well! and I suppose you are as much shocked and scandalized as the rest;" she stole a shy glance at him through her long lashes as she spoke.

"Not exactly," he answered, "but then

my nerves are, perhaps, less sensitive, and my moral perceptions less clear."

Margaret brightened, and looked full in his face now. She knew he did not look down upon or misjudge her.

"Even Lady Erlescliffe was angry, angrier than I have ever seen her, and gave me such a lecture when we got home; but I was not to blame, how could I help meeting Rob?"

"Well," replied Cecil Slade deliberately, "regarding things from society's stand-point, the meeting *was* a little awkward, Madge; but it would have been the height, or rather depth, of meanness to pass by an old friend unrecognised because he stood a few rungs lower on the social ladder than yourself. That is the rock society and I split upon years ago. It fosters false pride, false shame, and shuts its silly eyes, or rather turns its back on things noble and true. You have found me

a true prophet, I think. Do you remember our conversation as we walked through the orchard at Clinton?"

"Remember it!" she repeated, as a quick upward glance shot from her eyes to his as she repeated his words. "Do I remember it!—there is not a moment of all that day that I shall ever forget."

"Nor I," he said, with a half-sigh, in whispered tones that were full of deep feeling; though he uttered but the two brief words, somehow their hands met, and were clasped together in a close clinging clasp, as though they would never unclose again. A silence fell between them—a silence that was more full of meaning, and told more to their beating hearts, than any mere words would have done, for there are moments in life, and this was one of them, when we feel we want a newer, richer language to clothe our thoughts and express our feel-

ings; words are too meagre and poor to convey the overflow of the soul's joy; but, after all, the love that can be told in soft phrases or painted in pretty poetical colouring is of the poorest, shallowest description. The richest one lies buried in the bosom of the earth, and the rich, deep love, whether of man or woman, that seizes upon the life and is a part of it, lies deep down, and twines itself about the heart's core in sublime silence, veiled in sweet mystery, revealing itself in its own time and in its own fashion, with most scanty usage of the mother tongue. A look, a touch, speaks to the heart with a warmer, truer eloquence than any words could convey through the ear.

Cecil Slade looked upon the sweet glowing face that was half turned from him, not with the puling fancy of a love-sick boy, but with the concentrated passion of a man,

a passion that he has struggled against and trampled down till it has grown strong as the mighty sea waves, and beaten down all barriers that held it between common bounds.

"Margaret!" he whispered, and his soft love notes harmonised with their soul's still music, "lift up your head—let me look into your eyes—now, this minute!"

Slowly and shyly the face was raised to his, the long silken lashes were lifted from her eyes, and for a second the soul leapt up and looked into his. What did the silent eyes say to him? He knew. There was no need for her to say, "I love you;" he knew that the essence of the innocent girl's life, the first fruits of a woman's love, exhaled and bloomed for him—they lay ripe and ready for his gathering. Eyes looked into eyes for a second in rapt communion, then, with impulsive passion, his arms were flung

round her; he drew her closer and closer to him till heart beat against heart, and their lips met in one pure long kiss.

Had they not been so occupied with themselves, or with one another, they would have heard the carriage roll up a moment ago, and the street-door open and shut as Lady Erlescliffe entered the house; but being blind and deaf to everything beyond their own magic circle, they heard nothing till the rustling of silk caused them to turn their eyes towards the door, and in a moment Lady Erlescliffe stood upon the threshold.

She looked from one to the other in unutterable surprise. Cecil still stood with his arm round Margaret, never making the slightest attempt to withdraw it. There was something in the expression of his face that was strange to it; something, indeed, of a higher, nobler character, the usual air of

general boredom had faded away, and in its place there was a glad, happy look, as though the restless, wandering soul had reached its haven at last. Margaret's face was aglow with blushes, and her eyes shone with an exultant, glad content. He kept his arm round her, never attempting to withdraw it, nor did he seem at all confused by his mother's astonished gaze.

"Cecil!" she exclaimed. "*You* here at this time of night? Margaret too! I thought your head ached so badly you intended to go early to bed."

Margaret freed herself from Cecil's hold, and passed swiftly to Lady Erlescliffe's side; she flung one arm round her, and with her head half drooping on her breast, said softly,

"Dear Lady Erlescliffe, don't be vexed with me to-night. *I* am not going to be vexed at anything any more."

Lady Erlescliffe patted her with a caressing gesture, as she added, addressing her son with more severity than was usual with her,

"What have you been saying to this foolish child, Cecil? You might, at least, leave your mother's house free from your vanities and follies."

"I shall be very glad to relieve you of both, mother, as soon as Margaret makes up her mind, as at the present moment she represents my pet vanity and folly all in one," answered Cecil, with his usual *sang-froid.*

"I do not understand. What does he mean, Margaret?"

"He means—that is, we have been talking," she began embarrassedly. "Why don't you tell her, Cecil?" she added, flashing a quick glance from her eyes to his.

"Well, mother," he answered, with a

proud, fond look upon the girl's face as he drew her to his side again, "it means that Margaret and I have fathomed a mighty secret, we have suddenly discovered (all great discoveries are made suddenly) that we were sent into the world purposely for each other, and we mean to go through it to the end together!"

"Hush, Cecil, hush! you don't know what you are saying," exclaimed Lady Erlescliffe. "Margaret, love, go to bed. Cecil seems to have been talking an immense amount of folly. To-morrow he will think better of it, and so will you."

A family frown, which had descended from generation to generation, as a kind of heirloom, contracted Cecil's brow; he did not choose that his mother should speak in that light fashion of the one serious affection of his life.

"I am not a boy," he answered, "to take

a fickle fancy one day, to be uprooted like a weed the next."

"Be wise in time, and uproot this before it strikes too deeply. Let Margaret go, Cecil, I want to talk to you," urged Lady Erlescliffe earnestly.

"No," he answered, "Margaret must stay and hear all that is to be said, now or never. You say 'uproot this fancy before it strikes too deeply.' God knows it has become the root and fibre of my life already. I know the folly, the unfairness of it, so far as Margaret is concerned. I know I am not much of a match. She ought to have looked higher."

"Higher! Oh, Cecil, I have looked to the highest!" she whispered so softly that only his quick ear caught her words.

"Then why, in heaven's name, do you cross her with your selfish fancy?—it is selfish, and you *know* it will not last—for

the gratification of your own selfish feeling, you may perhaps mar her whole life long."

Lady Erlescliffe spoke so strongly, with so much emphatic meaning in her voice, the very suggestion that his love would *not last long* banished the colour swiftly from Margaret's cheeks, and, for a second, quenched the light in her eyes; but he, having a strong faith in his own constancy, said quickly—

"*I* mar her life! if I thought that, I would blow my brains out, or float heels upward in the Serpentine, before the morning. God knows, I have tried to turn my back upon the fairest prospect a man's soul or eyes could contemplate; but fate is too strong for us, the faster we fly from it, the faster it flies after, pulls us back and sometimes knocks us down at the door of our own desires. I came here to-night to talk over a little plan which would have sent me

to the other side of the globe; but somehow Margaret and I 'fell a-talking,' and I've made up my mind to stay at home."

"He was going because of me," said Margaret shyly to Lady Erlescliffe, "but I think he found out I cared for him a little before he told me so."

Lady Erlescliffe looked sadly upon the girl's glowing face as she answered kindly, though her voice sounded harsh and uncompromising,

"I love you very dearly, Margaret, but you are not suited to my son. I would rather he married any woman in the world but you."

"Dear Lady Erlescliffe, we are not thinking of being married," exclaimed Margaret, brightening; then noticing the perplexed look that swept over Lady Erlescliffe's face, she added quickly, "at least, not for years and years."

"Humph!" exclaimed Cecil smiling, "I am afraid that awful prospect will have to be faced at no such very remote period, Madge."

"But why are you vexed with him for liking me," rejoined Margaret—her soft hand closed clasped in his, as though they had no intention of loosing one another.

"Because—" began Lady Erlescliffe, hesitating, then adding quickly, "but then it is no use talking to you, Margaret, there are certain things you never will comprehend—Cecil, my dear boy, you know your uncle's views. What will he think when he hears of this?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," replied Cecil, "but as I don't mean to consult him, it doesn't much matter. He would have me go in for increasing the family influence, whereas it suits me better to go in for increasing my own personal happiness."

"He should be consulted, Cecil," she answered severely, "remember he is my only brother; very few of us can afford to fly in the face of our relations."

"Every man can afford to do that, when he has once made himself independent of them, as I have done," he answered; "my family obligations are of the slightest possible description, and I hold them lightly; if the fetters gall me, I shall throw them off entirely."

"Cecil, you pain me," said his mother reproachfully, "but I suppose you will treat the world in the same fashion?"

"Undoubtedly," he answered. "Not that the world can have anything to say in the matter, except, perhaps, that Margaret is a fool for throwing herself away on a poor beggar like me; the world is a poor, cowardly beast, after all; though hearts are broken, and souls crucified at its altar, it

plays the bully, and holds you in iron bonds while you crouch before it; but only shake yourself free from it, and laugh in its foolish old face, and it crouches before *you* and respects you all the more for your independence."

While they were still talking, Margaret, by Cecil's desire, went to her room, "to get," as he suggested, "her beauty sleep before the morning," but she had no idea of going to bed. She undrew her curtains, and, looking out into the moonlight, sat down to calm her nerves and think over the events of the day. Things passed through her mind like visions seen in dreamland. Surely there had never before been such a beginning and such an end to a single day! In the morning everything had worn the usual common-place look, and promised nothing but the usual dull routine; the hours would pass as they had passed before, and would

go passing on into eternity. Then had come pain and sorrow, and at last, when she felt fast sinking into a slough of despond, she was lifted heavenwards, where she lingered a long time dreaming—dreaming.

Lady Erlescliffe, who had held a long conference with her son, came in to see if she was asleep, and finding her still up with wide-open eyes, gazing far away into the dim delights of distance, she remembered the days of her own youth, and the unfulfilled longing of her own world-weary heart—how she, in her day, had so looked and longed for that which never came! She kissed Margaret tenderly, and with a word of loving chiding, bid her go to bed and sleep till morning.

Sleep! How could she sleep with this new-born joy beating at her heart, and leaping through her veins with a mad delight, as though it would never be still

again? Sleep! She would not lose a moment of this delightful waking for all the empty glory of the sweetest dream. With hands clasped upon her breast, she looked out upon the moonlit world, and wondered what she had ever done that she should be so happy!—she felt as though life had emptied its treasure-house, and given her all in the great gift of this one man's love. Woman-like, she had made her god, and then in idolatrous belief had fallen down and worshipped it.

Slowly the lassitude, consequent upon over-excitement, crept over her, the bright colour of her happy thoughts faded from her brain, as, still holding his image between her eyelids, she fell asleep at last.

CHAPTER IX.

PLIGHTED.

THINGS appeared more prosaic in the morning. The sun was shining its brightest; the pert little sparrows were disporting their poor ragged selves in its flood of light, twittering and chirping gaily, unconscious of their mean condition as the most worthless of the feathered tribe; they hopped upon the window-sill—which Margaret always strowed with crumbs—peeped in with their cunning brown eyes at her canary, singing so sweetly in its gilded cage, then fluttering their wings, flew away, chirp-

ing louder than ever, as though exulting that they, at least, were free.

Lady Erlescliffe frequently breakfasted in her own room, and Margaret, looking as fresh and sweet as a morning rose, the soft happy light still shining in her eyes, sat alone at her solitary breakfast, opening her letters, and pouring out her coffee, as though nothing had happened since yesterday; everything was going on just the same, yet her soul had been new-born, baptised and received into a new life, a new love. Presently there was a loud ring at the bell, the door opened, and shut; and in another moment her god descended from the misty cloudland, entered the room, clothed in broadcloth and fine linen, even wearing on his head the proverbial chimney-pot, which everybody abuses and nobody has the courage wholly to discard. Their hands met, as they had met scores of times before,

but there was something different in the warm, close clasp as they met now, and a moment later the sweet lips were lifted to meet his too.

"I have scarcely closed my eyes," he whispered, "I was afraid you might repent before the morning."

"Repent!" she answered, shaking her head incredulously, well knowing he had no such fear. "Like a child who has cried for a new toy, and when it gets what it has longed for, breaks it."

They chatted on like a pair of foolish love-birds, being themselves the centre round which their thoughts and words chiefly revolved; for a brief time they revelled in love's delightful follies, in brief silences and fond, foolish talk, which in those early hours of our life's romance we would not change for the concentrated

wisdom of the whole wide world. His philosophical spirit, however, was never too long lost in cloudland; he theorised dreamily for awhile; and then they set themselves to discover how and when their mutual attraction began, and to trace its growth from day to day, until it attained to its present gigantic proportions, embracing the future and colouring all the past.

"And you really cared for me from the very first?" she whispered, lifting her lovely eyes lovingly to his face.

"I really did, strange as it may appear to you," he answered, "it was a desperate case of love at first sight; at one time it threatened to be fatal, and now it has only yielded to a kind of homœopathic remedy; that which kills can cure——"

"It does seem strange," she rejoined, thoughtfully, evidently pondering over the

beginning of his sentence, "and since then you have tried not to care for me at all?"

"Take my word for that; I tried my very hardest," he answered heartily, "an easy conquest gives small glory, Madge, and I own I fell a very unwilling victim at the last."

"And why did you?" she said, with a little petulant pout, "it isn't very complimentary to me to feel that I have got an unwilling lover, it seems as though you were driven into loving me."

"So I was," he answered, with a world of love-light in his eyes, "driven with the force of my own wild will against my will, which broke down all miserable barriers at last. You don't know what strong fortifications a proud man sometimes erects against himself, Madge. I kept away from you for days and weeks, though all the while I

longed for you—God knows how I longed, as a blind man longs for light! Your face haunted me by day, and came between me and my night's rest. Ah, well! those wretched times are over now. 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we will.' Last night I meant to put the seas between us; to-day—ah, well! things are different now—how different to you and me!"

His questioning eyes were answered only by a soft sigh, escaping, as it seemed, from a heart overflowing with its own great joy. Silence again fell between them; his arm stole softly round her, and her curly head drooped upon his shoulder. He stooped and kissed her white forehead as he said—

"I thought I had shut the doors of my life upon all womankind, Margaret love, till you stole in and filled its emptiness, as I vowed no woman should again."

"Again!"—she echoed the word with a slight accent of dismay, and a cloud no bigger than a man's hand floated across her heaven—"did you ever care so *very* much for anyone before, Cecil?"

"Well, I suppose I did," he answered, with speculative indifference; "I thought I did at the time, but we are all apt to make mistakes in those matters."

"Rather awkward a mistake of that kind, isn't it? Are you sure you're not mistaking yourself again?" and a little galled accent mingled with her honey tones.

"Quite," he answered, with a supreme smile at the idea of there being any mistake about his feelings now.

"And did she know—I mean, were you really and regularly engaged?" inquired Margaret, her curiosity thoroughly awakened; she had chanced to catch the end of

the rat's tail, and she determined to drag it bodily from its hole.

"Really and regularly," he answered, in his quiet, cynical way. "Our mutual families met in full conclave, the bond was signed and sealed; I was dragged through a whole season, and exhibited to the world as the future owner of a pink and white angel in tulle and tarlatan; the very day was almost fixed, when she, and her tolerably large fortune, were to be legally transferred to me."

"So near as that?" exclaimed Margaret, taking in every word with eager ears—"and why did you break it off?"

"That piece of blissful folly was her work," he replied. "It isn't a pleasant thing for a fellow to be thrown over; I fancy I felt rather badly about it at the time, but I've been devoutly thankful ever since."

"And what became of her?"

"She consolèd herself easily for the loss of me; within three months she threw herself and her money-bags into the arms of a morose millionaire, who carried her off to one of his places in the north, and they say he is breaking her heart as fast as he can. I don't feel particularly sympathetic, and I wouldn't stoop to pick up the pieces even if I could."

"How vindictive men are if they think a woman has behaved badly to them!" she said reflectively.

"Well," he rejoined slowly, as though he were undergoing a kind of mental analysis, "I'm not a malevolent fellow, as a rule; I could forgive an injury, but I never forgave a man, woman, or child who made me ridiculous in the eyes of the world, and a blundering idiot in my own estimation."

"When we love people, we forgive them everything," said Margaret softly.

"That is a very pretty way of talking," he answered, "but *I* don't believe it. A stranger I could forgive freely—a friend, no."

"I don't understand that."

"Yet it is easy of comprehension."

"From your point of view perhaps—not from mine," she answered.

"See here, I give my friend my warmest sympathy, regard, and perfect confidence. I open my heart to him. If he enters there to betray me, if he wrongs me or I wrong him, we are more guilty towards each other than any stranger could be, and therefore less deserving of forgiveness. I give much, and I expect much in return."

"I see," replied Margaret, and a slight shade crossed her face as she spoke; "you make friendship a kind of mercantile bar-

gain, to be paid in kind, or killed at the first defalcation. I don't agree with you at all. I think that either true friendship or true love is mercifully disposed to forgive everything. Though it may grieve for the sin, it is tender to the sinner."

"Ay, but true friendship, like true love, is a scarce article in this world's vanity fair. Madge, darling, they do not put forth their leaves and grow from every human heart. There are myriads of men, and women too, who are simply incapable of a single generous feeling for anything or anyone except themselves. But whither are we drifting? You are looking quite grave too! What *are* you thinking of, Madge?"

"I was thinking of that—that person," she answered, a warm blush spreading over her face as she averted it from his gaze. "*She* was as dear to you once as *I* am now, and I was wondering if you would ever

think or speak of me as you do now of her."

"Then don't wonder about anything so outrageously absurd," he answered, in impatient, vexed accents. "How on earth came we to touch on such an unpleasant subject?"

"I asked you about it," said Margaret, "because I wanted to know if you had ever been really fond of anyone before."

He could not help smiling, though rather grimly, at her innocent admission.

"Then don't ask foolish questions again, Margaret," he said gravely. "You are vexed, I know; but you could not expect a man to come to my age without suffering some gentle touches of tender follies. If you cared for the first puppy love of overgrown boys, you should never have crossed my path; and even now——"

"Ah, Cecil, Cecil!" she exclaimed,

"what have I done to make you speak so sternly? You *know* I would rather starve upon your love, if I had but a grain a day, than thrive upon bushels flung at my feet by any man living."

It is not often we throw aside the outer covering that wraps the inner self in a kind of mental mufti, and let the soul flash up from the eyes and lips as Margaret's soul flashed forth, and gave utterance now, and in a second more it sank down, ashamed of its own love-kindled warmth.

He *looked* all the proud gratification he felt at hearing from her own lips how well she loved him; he knew she uttered no vain protestations as she spoke her few impassioned words, and then was silent. He answered her tenderly—

"Margaret, darling, you know you are my own twin soul; you have my most per-

fect love and perfect faith; but you must not attempt to dig my lesser loves out of their graves; let them alone; they will never rise up to trouble you, who are the last, dearest, and best beloved of all. There is no false fancy about this love of ours, Madge," he added; "the real true thing has come to us; let us take it, and be thankful, and never trouble ourselves about past things that are dead and gone."

"I never will," she answered, lifting her fervent eyes to his, "and, Cecil," she added archly, "I don't care if you have had a long ladder of loves, like Jacob's, reaching to the skies, so that you place me on the highest rung and hold me there for always."

When Lady Erlescliffe joined them this morning, she made no allusion to the dissatisfaction she had so frankly expressed the

last evening; she was always kind; but now she seemed more than usually kind to Margaret; and Margaret felt that Cecil's mother was almost as dear to her as her own would have been. Lady Erlescliffe suggested that Cecil should run down to Clinton to see Mr. Siward, as even the briefest interview on this matter would be more satisfactory than any communication that could be made by letter. Cecil agreed, saying it was the very course of action he should himself have proposed. Margaret, perfectly approved of the plan; and an idea at once presented itself to her mind that it would be delighful to go home and spend a few days there in Cecil's company. The idea grew as rapidly as Jack's beanstalk, and soon ripened into an irrepressible longing, which she was not slow to express to Lady Erlescliffe. Cecil caught with eager delight at the suggestion; though Lady Erlescliffe de-

murred, and brought that poor bedraggled propriety to do fatigue duty on the occasion, the young people united their forces, and thrust all weaker things aside. Lady Erlescliffe argued in a weak worldly fashion upon the impropriety of their "running about the world alone" (so she phrased it), and brought forward the usual bugbear, "society," where such things were unknown.

"Then the sooner it gets accustomed to "such things the better," replied Cecil, "I fancy Madge and I shall improve the views of society by showing we care nothing about it," and he launched out, ridiculing mercilessly in his own racy fashion the petty conventionalities that are forged to bind genial, generous human nature down to society's narrow ways. In spite of herself, Lady Erlescliffe smiled and left him uncontradicted, as she was by no means strong in argument, and had sense enough to know

it; she was generally ignominiously vanquished when she ventured into the field with either Cecil or Margaret, so adopted the wiser plan of yielding with a good grace as she yielded now.

"Mr. Siward ought to be communicated with at once," she said, "but it is impossible for Margaret to leave town at present, she has one or two engagements which cannot be broken; a garden-party to-morrow, and we have accepted an invitation for the next evening from your friend the Pre-Raphaelite artist."

"You called on them, mother?" exclaimed Cecil, evidently much pleased. "I heard of your visit; and you made yourself marvellously agreeable, I hear."

"Yes, I found them rather nice," she answered, "the wife and daughters especially, so perfectly ladylike and well bred."

"Yes, really well bred, mother," rejoined

Cecil heartily. "With that thorough good breeding which pays equal attention to high or low, rich or poor, and sets everyone at ease with a kindly, considerate tact which in many houses one misses sadly. In my land of 'gentle Bohemia' you get the real thing, while in what is called fashionable society you get, as a rule (of course there are exceptions), but a poor imitation. Well, I'm glad you are going on Thursday; I shall be there, and I'm glad Margaret's going, because I'm sure she'll enjoy it, and I know I shall enjoy having her there."

"It is a long time since I've really enjoyed going out to things of that sort," said Margaret, "though at one time I thought I should never get tired of them; it is the same thing over and over again. I suppose, in an artist's house, we shall have pictures to look at, as well as finely-dressed people."

"Not especially. We don't go in for fine

clothes, and parade about like dressed-up dolls. There is less of the milliner's model kind of business, and more of the graces of nature among us."

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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